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TOMORROW IS OURS !

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TOMORROW IS OURS !

A Novel of the India of to-day.

By

KHWAJA AHMAD ABBAS

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To
SNEHPRABHA and ANIL
—the only way I know to bring them together—,
and to

MUJTABAI,
wife and comrade,
who made the writing of this
novel possible by cheerfully
surrendering the hours which
rightly belonged to her.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

All the characters in this novel are fictitious
but some are not *entirely* fictitious.

•

“That which we are, we are ;
Our equal temper of heroic hearts
Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield”

—TENNYSON (*Ulysses*)

“Betrayed liberty, take sanctuary in the hearts
of the faithful, fold your wounded pinions ! In
days to come you will resume your splendid
flight.”

—ROMAIN ROLLAND

•

1

AS the graceful dancer glided on the centre of the stage, she was greeted by thunderous applause. "Who is she? What is her name?" Whispered enquiries flew all over the hall.

Parvati Premchand, twenty and full of the vitality of that age, was the most popular student of the medical college at Lucknow. A hundred pairs of eyes followed her every movement from the moment she stepped into the college compound; and many a romantic Romeo had declared that he would not mind being a stiff body on a marble slab if only *she* would dissect him. But alas, she loved no one! She was an enigma to her fellow-students, unfathomable and elusive.

Parvati was endowed by nature with good looks. Brought up by her mother according to rational principles, unrestricted by the taboos and the fears of orthodox households, she was an energetic girl, almost boyish in her lack of what is known as maidenly shyness and restraint. She was a bundle of nervous energy, a free soul seeking her fulfilment in diverse forms of mental and physical activity. Her studies and preparation for a future medical career, the games and sports, absorbed only part of her being. Her love for her mother was tremendous, yet there was a great fund of tenderness in her heart which still needed an object to be showered upon.

In Indian classical dancing Parvati discovered what she was seeking, at once an escape and fulfilment. Here

was an outlet for her surplus physical energy a rigorous exercise for bone and muscle which left her in a delicious state of exhaustion. But it was much more than the bodily exercise which could also be had in tennis or badminton. The stylised movements awakened something within her, a natural sense of rhythm, each limb responding almost instinctively to the urgent call of music. The sinuous body movements satisfied some vague but insistent, inner craving in her. The colours of the costumes worn for such dances, the costumes themselves, appealed to her æsthetic instincts, the *mudras* and the *abhinaya* brought out her latent histrionic talent. But, more than anything in particular, it was the entire routine of dancing that fascinated and thrilled her—the colour and the music, the rhythmic movements, the varied emotions expressed in the subtle language of gesture, the sensuous delight of turning and twisting and wriggling her body, the eloquent tinkle of the bells, now merry, now plaintive, now creating a storm of passions, now invoking the gentlest emotions. She had had no formal religious education and, by her scientific study and conviction she was almost an agnostic, but something appealed to her romantic self in the mythological stories of gods and goddesses interpreted through the classical dances.

And yet, busy as she was most of the time with her medical studies—in another three years she would be a full-fledged doctor—, dancing was no more than an interesting, engrossing hobby for her. Her main interest lay in preparing herself for a medical career through which alone, like her mother, she could fulfil her chosen destiny. The healing of the sick she had always regarded

as the noblest vocation, particularly for a woman, and two years in medical college had initiated her into the magic of modern surgery. Her slender, tapering fingers had quickly learnt to dissect with uncanny precision, her artistic nature had brought to it fastidiousness and a *finesse* which ensure immaculate surgery. Many people wondered how she could reconcile the blood-and-puss of the operation table with her sensitive and artistic nature, but they reckoned without her rational upbringing and close association with the work of a mother who was a doctor. Parvati found no contradiction in her devotion to medicine and the muses. Indeed, within her mind, she was constantly conjuring up a synthesis of these two apparently unrelated human activities, the possibility of using music for healing disorders of the mind, and of restoring the energy of atrophied or paralysed limbs by awakening the rhythmic muscular responses through dancing.

It was quite natural, therefore, that when the medical students arranged a variety entertainment to collect money for a new cancer hospital, Parvati should agree to contribute a dance to the programme. It was the first time she would dance on a public stage but she was not afraid.

The show proved to be a personal triumph for Parvati. Her dance was highly appreciated, getting as many as three *encores*. And that night she discovered yet another vital factor in the magical appeal of dance—the audience! She felt herself responding not only to the music of the orchestra but that other tune that is set by the reactions of the spectators. If a whirling movement was applauded

she instinctively repeated it, when a particularly graceful gesture failed to evoke an enthusiastic appreciation she put all her art and soul into it when the routine required a repetition of it. And when at the end of the dance, a thunderous applause broke out and Parvati returned to the stage for an *encore*, she knew that never would she be able to really dance without such a big gathering. What was a personal pleasure until then became in an instant a social responsibility. It was an occasion she would not forget throughout her life.

Numerous were the compliments showered upon Parvati by her friends and fellow-students, as she returned to the dressing-room.

"Oh, Miss Premchand, you were great. Please allow me to congratulate you." Mehta was always correct and formal both in dress and speech, with well-pomaded hair and well-greased tongue.

"Say Parvati, you were swell. Your dance was a hundred per cent hit." She smiled at Mirza's Americanisms, learnt from the Hollywood pictures which he religiously saw, as the movie-minded youth turned to address a friend, "Oh boy, oh boy, our Parvati is a real ball of fire."

"Hello, darling!" This was Leela, the flirt of the class and terribly jealous of Parvati's popularity. "You don't dance badly at all. Why, if you join Uday Shankar's Dance Centre at Almorah, in four or five years you might be able to become quite a good dancer."

"Now that Parvati has made a success as a dancer, she might leave the medical college and take to the stage—or, who knows, the screen! Then what will we

poor medicos, do?" Rameshwar the college clown, spoke with mock seriousness.

"Don't worry," came a quick retort, "she will take you along to replace V. H. Desai as a comedian." And everyone burst into laughter.

Among the crowd of collegians that had stormed the dressing-room, shaking her hand, pressing congratulations, praises and invitations upon her a few clearly did not belong there. One of them, a fat and rather oily individual with offensively elongated side-whiskers, approached Parvati and without an introduction shouted above the general noise.

"Miss Parvati, my name is Nataraj Ratan." Then he extended a fat paw, wet with perspiration. Parvati, who knew how to deal with such unwelcome intruders, responded with a *namaskar*.

"This is my card," handing over a bit of greasy paste-board, "I am an impresario. I arrange dramas, dance programmes, variety entertainments. I will give you five hundred rupees a month if you join my troupe. I tell you I can make you the greatest dancer of India. I can give you world-fame, too, for I am soon taking my dancers on a tour of Europe and America. Surely, you would like to..."

He did not remain to finish the sentence. Parvati silenced him with a freezing glance, then pointed to the door, "Will you please get out?" She was shocked beyond words by the odious banality of this commercial proposition. When the great impresario was gone, she regained her sense of humour and dropped the card in her bag to show it to her mother.

"I say, Parvati," said Leela who never missed an opportunity to have a crack at another girl, "Why didn't you accept his offer? Five hundred rupees is not an ordinary amount. And, moreover, he was *such* a handsome man and so obviously infatuated by you. It was a clear case of love at first sight."

"Really, Leela!" Ramesh came to Parvati's rescue, "Then why don't *you* join his troupe?"

"But I am not a dancer like Parvati," protested Leela.

Ramesh had the answer ready and it sent the whole room into peals of laughter. "You may not dance. But at least you can make *him* dance!"

"There was only one thing that tempted me in his proposition," said Parvati when the chuckles had subsided, "His plan of taking a troupe of Indian dancers to Europe and America. I wouldn't mind having a free tour of the world."

"Soon there won't be much world left." This was Vaidya, the politician, "I have been listening to the radio and war might break out in Europe any moment now."

"Ah! You and your radio!", contemptuously spat out Rameshwar, "Don't give us that old yarn again. They have been talking of war for a whole year now. I tell you your old Hitler is in blue funk and dare not start the fire-works."

"Don't forget, Parvati," Swarup who was the Secretary of the Dramatic Society called out from the door, "We are having a party in the Common Room for all those who took part in the show. Come there straight after you have changed."

"I am sorry, Swarup. But I must go home. My mother must be waiting for me."

Parvati wanted to stay for the party. She loved company and noise and laughter. But she loved her mother even more. It had been a sad disappointment for her that the old lady had not been able to attend the show owing to some urgent delivery case at the hospital. Now she must be waiting for her to return and tell her every detail of the function that was such a signal triumph for her beloved daughter. Parvati hurried homewards, all the way excitedly thinking of the many things she had to tell and how happy they would make her mother.

Parvati loved her mother and admired her. Of all the lady doctors in the city, Mrs. Radhabai Premchand was undoubtedly the most popular, efficient and human. She treated hundreds of poor folk free and it was said of her that she cured her patients more by kindness and her gentle presence than by medicines. There were many who almost worshipped her. Parvati knew how brave and noble her mother was. After the death of her husband who had left behind a loving memory and an aching void in the young widow's heart, but nothing more material than a library full of books on Law and Politics, she had fought the world alone. How lovingly she had brought up her daughter, giving her the best of everything ! Parvati felt most grateful to her mother for the education she had received. She had been sent to the best school and college in Allahabad and when she had expressed a desire to go in for medical studies the mother had agreed,

without protest, to leave her home town and settle practice and migrated to Lucknow along with her daughter

Reaching home, Parvati took the verandah steps in her stride and burst into the sitting-room. Her mother was not there. She looked around the small and cosy room, and, on a sudden impulse, went to the portrait of her father that hung on the opposite wall. As she looked up at the strong but kindly face she wished her father was alive today. How proud of his daughter he would have been ! Parvati was eight years old when her father had died and she remembered him only as a tall, white-clad figure who rarely stayed at home for more than a day or two. He was for ever coming and going but every time he came, he brought something nice for his daughter—generally a picture book.

From her mother Parvati had learnt the story of her father and learnt to love his memory and be proud of him. He was a young lawyer of independent views and rational outlook who had married for love, outside and below his caste in defiance of all opposition from his orthodox Brahmin family, thus creating a precedent which later was to be followed by many social iconoclasts like him. He had been ostracised but he did not care. He set up practice at the Allahabad High Court and, being a good lawyer, people came to him even if he was an outcaste. He gave up the flourishing practice, however, when Mahatma Gandhi started his Non-Co-operation movement in 1920 and called up all lawyers to boycott British Courts. After that he threw himself heart and soul in national work was arrested and imprisoned and

when he returned, the jail diet had ruined his health. But he continued to be an active Congress worker, attending the courts for a week in the month to earn money just sufficient to maintain the family, devoting all the rest of his time to travelling, lecturing, organizing, without rest and without proper regard for his health that was already seriously impaired. The end came in 1927 and he passed away after a brief but fatal attack of pneumonia, leaving behind a widow and an eight-year-old daughter. In his preoccupation with political work he had neglected to provide for them. But Parvati bore no grudge against him. On the contrary she was proud to be the daughter of such a devoted servant of the Nation.

Parvati looked long and lovingly at the portrait and sadness crept into her merry eyes. She wished her father were alive. She did not know that he lived—in *her*! If she had got her good looks from her mother, her keen, alert social conscience was a legacy from the father. If the eyes which were admired by so many were a gift from the mother, the restlessness in them was clearly traceable to the father. Her pride came from the Brahmin Premchand, her humility from the lower-caste Radhabai. In her two streams of life had met—the majestic Ganges and the humble, softy-flowing Jumna.

A servant entered the room, his footsteps breaking the reverie. Parvati enquired if her mother was back from the hospital and frantically rushed up the stairs on learning that she had returned quite early as she had developed high temperature and was resting in bed. Her heart beat wildly with nameless forebodings.

Pale against the white pillows, but smiling, her mother greeted her. "Oh, mother, why didn't you send for me? If I knew you were ill I would never have gone through with the dance."

"That is exactly why I did not send for you, my dear. Now tell me all about it."

Parvati sat down on the edge of the bed and recounted everything, not excluding the encounter with the impresario. Her mother smiled wanly and congratulated Parvati, but in the depth of those limpid eyes that the daughter knew so well she saw a strange and frightening tiredness. Was it the grim shadow of death?

2

THE high fever developed into a case of meningitis. Overwork had already weakened the defences of the body and three days later the lady doctor who had helped hundreds to recover from their illnesses succumbed to her own.

With the death of her mother, Parvati's world utterly collapsed. So much in life had depended upon the beloved one who was no more that existence without her seemed an impossibility. Her memory filled every room in the house, everything spoke of her, wept for her. For days she did not read the papers and when she did, the news that Germany had invaded Poland and Britain and France had declared war upon Germany failed to make a

deep impression on her mind. She hated Hitler and the Nazis but in that hour of personal tragedy, the battlefields of Europe seemed too remote, too unreal. The only reality was that her mother, her beloved mother, was no more. Without a struggle, she surrendered herself to a fit of weeping and melancholy. Left friendless and alone, she was plunged into the bottomless pit of grief.

And yet life intrudes on private sorrow with merciless unconcern. Parvati's tears had hardly dried when she was faced with a host of practical problems. The bungalow had to be vacated as it belonged to the hospital and the new lady doctor would be moving in. Parvati had no money and when she enquired from the hospital cashier she learnt, with a pang of grateful remembrance, that her mother had taken a loan of nearly a thousand rupees, deductible from her salary in instalments, to pay for her daughter's fees at the medical college and the last month's salary would not be nearly enough to write off that debt. How sweet and quietly self-sacrificing had been her mother! Parvati's eyes filled with tears of affection and gratitude. But the economic problem could not be washed away with tears. She had to do something about it and that too pretty soon as she had only one more day she could stay in the hospital bungalow. How was she going to live? How would she pay her medical college fees? There were still three years more before she could get the degree and not less than three thousand rupees would be needed to complete the course. To whom could she turn in this hour of dire predicament?

Relations? But both her parents had completely broken away from their respective families when they

had contracted their inter-caste marriage. Parvati had never met any of them but she knew she had a maternal uncle, a younger brother of whom her mother had sometimes spoken. He lived in Benares, engaged in some petty trade or the other. But would he care to help her, the product of a marriage that, according to the orthodox members of her mother's family, was no marriage at all, was tantamount to adultery? Parvati dismissed the thought.

Next morning she was resolved in her mind as to her future course. She would sell whatever clothes and furniture her mother had left, live for the time being in some hostel and then seek employment somewhere perhaps as a teacher. She, of course, would have to give up her medical studies and it was such a painful wrench that she tried not to think of it.

She was busy packing up her things when she heard footsteps on the bare floor of the verandah behind and turning round saw a lean, middle-aged man, dressed in *dhotie* and silk and *kurta* with an umbrella under his arm, approaching her. He came into the room, surveyed the litter on the floor, then spat out *pan*; juice in the verandah and revealed yellow, discoloured teeth as he spoke.

"Are you Parvati?"

"Yes," she replied and wondered who he was and what he wanted.

"Good. I am Bhagwati Charan, your uncle from Benares. I read about my sister's death in some paper and so I have come to take you away."

Parvati did not relish the idea of living in the house of this unknown uncle of hers, undoubtedly an orthodox and narrow-minded person, but anything was better than being completely alone and helpless. At least for the time being she could find a roof above her head. Later on, when she found a job she would leave. She said, "Thank you, uncle, I will come with you." That evening they left by train.

From Lucknow to Benares proved an unpleasant change for Parvati. The contrast between the spacious Civil Lines where she had lived with her mother in the hospital bungalow and the crooked, narrow, smelly streets in one of which her uncle's old-fashioned house was situated was symbolic. In Allahabad where she had passed most of her life, thanks to the emancipatory influence of the Congress movement and the example set by the Nehru and other enlightened families, a freer social atmosphere existed in which the new women of Parvati's type were just beginning to breathe. To a slightly lesser extent the same was true of Lucknow. In Benares, holy and sacrosanct, the city of a thousand golden temples, men's minds were still filled with the superstitions and taboos of centuries ago. Religion, orthodoxy, priestcraft held unchallenged sway and modern ideas were frowned upon as unpardonable heresies. A woman's position was particularly intolerable in this city where tens of thousands of widows, with shaved heads, passed their miserable days on the temple *ghats*. Parvati, rebellious soul, had spoken aloud against such indignities imposed on her sex by man-made social

laws, but in the stifling atmosphere of Benares she found her voice choked.

Her own personal position was far from satisfactory. Her uncle proved to be a widower and there was no one in the house except a toothless hag, some poor relation, who cooked for Bhagwati Charan and looked after the household. She was a crafty old creature, shrivelled and frustrated, who cringed before the authority of Bhagwati Charan but tried to lord it over Parvati in whom she found a convenient target for firing away all her jealous hatred and contempt for modern, educated women. One day Parvati, feeling desperately in need of a bit of fresh air both for her lungs and her mind, went for a couple of hours to meet an old friend of hers who was a student at the Hindu University and lived in the women's hostel. When she returned there was a court-martial held by her uncle as if she had committed a grievous sin.

"Miss Saheb," he said, mocking her with crude irony, "this is not Allahabad. You are living in a respectable household and I can't allow you to loaf around like this"

Parvati knew the old woman was at the bottom of this but she made no reply. She hated scenes and did not want to argue with people who, she knew, were incapable of understanding her point of view. But she would have to leave that house.

That night as she lay in her room, awake with memories of her mother, she was shocked to hear what her uncle and the old woman were talking. Evidently they thought her asleep and spoke in audible whispers.

"How many times have I told you to get rid of her?", the old woman was saying, "Why do you impose this burden on yourself, an unnecessary expense?"

"Don't worry," replied Bhagwati Charan, "I have made all arrangements. In a week's time she won't be here and I will be richer by a couple of thousand rupees."

"Who is he?"

"Bansilal. You know him. His last wife died some months ago and he needs another one to look after his children."

"That old goldsmith? She ought to be glad to go into such a rich household."

"Yes, but he wanted to give only fifteen hundred. I told him my niece was not an ordinary girl. She was College-educated, young and beautiful. He couldn't have her as a wife for less than two thousand..."

So they were planning to sell her as if she was a sack of grain. Parvati felt aflame with indignation. She wanted to rush into their room and surprise them, to leave the house at that very hour. But she decided to wait till the morning and then talk with her uncle. If he was under the impression that he could dispose her of like some dumb, half-witted, illiterate girl he must be disillusioned.

Next day when she told her uncle that she would not allow herself to be sold off in marriage against her will, she found him strangely accommodating. Once he found her adamant, he did not try to coerce her at all.

"All right, Parvati, just as you wish. If I thought of it, it was only for your good. I may not be as modern as your mother or yourself but I know enough to see

the folly of forcing a girl into a marriage against her wishes. So, don't worry. I will end the matter today. You can live here in peace."

"Thank you, uncle," and she turned to go.

"Parvati! Just a minute."

"Yes, uncle."

"Must you call me uncle? You know, I am not much older than you."

For a moment Parvati failed to perceive the lustful look, the sensuous smile, that accompanied this remark. But when she did, her sensitive soul was filled with revulsion at the vile suggestion. It was as if someone had flung a bucketful of filth at her face. And her own uncle! She felt nauseated and ran from the room as from the presence of evil.

Later, when she reflected over it, she felt oddly grateful to her uncle. He had made up her wavering mind for her. The clouds of indecision disappeared, fear of the unknown was dispelled. Anything would be better than this, she would rather starve and sleep on the road-side than live in such a place. That night she left her uncle's house for ever.

It was a cold December night. Clutching her few belongings, she emerged in the semi-darkness of the street. A cold wind blew from the river, piercing through her scanty clothes, freezing the very marrow in her bones. But within her she was warmed by the fire in her soul and her steps were firm and resolute.

3

FROM the questionable security of her uncle's home, Parvati emerged into the no less questionable freedom of the outside world. She quickly learnt that a young woman seeking a career on her own, is fair game for all the human wolves prowling around in the jungles of brick and concrete that are the new industrial cities of India. Broken loose from the rigid morality and the unpretentious chivalry of the village, living amidst the contrasts of their own squalor and dirt and poverty and the glittering wealth and luxuries of the idle rich, there were to be found a mass of perhaps half a million souls pressed together, men and women and boys and girls often in conditions of tantalizing proximity, seeking escape in the cinemas and bringing back with them awakened longings, frustrated desires. The old culture was decaying, along with other ruins of feudalism, and what passed for the new culture was tinsel and trash discarded by the West and picked up by the awakening East, mistaking it for genuine modernism. The rising tide of industrialism brought in its wake the worst aspects of the profit-motive system and, among them, an intensification of the sensuous appetites, a dimming of the aesthetic and artistic values and a cynical disregard of the moral restraints.

For fear of being found by her uncle, Parvati had come to Cawnpore, the growing city of textile mills, where she hoped to get a job as a teacher in some

school. But it was more difficult than she had ever imagined. The better high schools wanted trained and diplomaed teachers, not half-baked doctors, while the salary offered in the primary schools was a mere pittance on which Parvati could hardly hope to maintain herself. She saw for the first time the problem of education from a new angle—the teacher's angle. And she was revolted. Were these wretched, half-starved spinsters and stunted girls, living on salaries that a self-respecting mill-worker would spurn, expected to usher in the dawn of a rational system of girls' education in India? The so-called 'national' schools, run by private philanthropists, were no better than the Government institutions—if anything they were worse, the personal whims of the wealthy and half-educated donors adding to the general chaos. Parvati preferred to sell her last trinket rather than throw herself to be ground down in this soulless machine.

Once she almost got a job. She had sent an application to the Secretary of a private 'national' school and received a rather hopeful reply calling her for an interview. The Secretary, Rai Bahadur Mohanlal, turned out to be a pot-bellied businessman who possessed one mill, half a dozen buildings and a shiny bald head. He received Parvati with an embarrassing display of cordiality.

‘Sit down, sit down, please,’ he said and collapsed, rather than sat down, in his own chair. Then through the narrow slits of his eyes he subjected the girl to a close scrutiny which was more like a connoisseur's appraisal.

"So your name is Parvati," glancing at the application lying on the table before him.

"Parvati *Premchand!*" She knew how to ward off unwanted familiarity.

"Oh, yes, of course." Then another look at the paper. "I see that you are not a trained teacher. Not even a graduate."

"I have only passed my Intermediate Science examination," she reminded him getting a little irritated, "But I have mentioned that already in the application. If you want a trained graduate teacher, naturally I am not suitable for the job." And she rose to go.

The Rai Bahadur implored her to sit down with a gesture of his hand. "Oh, please, don't get angry. I was only going through your qualifications and wondering what classes and in what subjects you could teach. I see that you passed your F. Sc. in First Division. So perhaps you could take the Middle standard girls in natural science, hygiene—and may be also arithmetic."

The job seemed to be at last within her grasp and she wondered what the salary would be.

"You see we generally start untrained under-graduate teachers on a salary of fifty rupees," the would-be employer was saying, "but in view of your special qualifications..." and he looked at her in a rather peculiar manner. Parvati was intrigued by this significant glance and thought the phrase "special qualifications" referred only to the academic distinction she had always secured in her examinations. Meanwhile she was interested in the emolument the Rai Bahadur was going to offer.

"Yes, as I said, in view of your special qualifications we might be able to give you a start of eighty rupees a month."

"I think it is quite reasonable," she said and she meant it.

'So that's settled,' said the Rai Bahadur and added solicitously. "By the way, would you like us to make some arrangements for your stay? You seem to be new to this place."

Parvati told him she would be grateful if a room was given to her in the girls' hostel attached to the school.

"Oh, no," the Secretary protested, "You won't be comfortable there. But I will tell you what I can do. Now I have got a big house and there are many rooms that are unoccupied. You see, Miss Parvati, I am a lonely widower..."

He spoke in melting tones but Parvati was not deceived. Now she understood the meaning of "special qualifications" and blood rushed to her cheeks in a flood of anger. But she managed to control her temper and replied with more sarcasm than indignation.

'So you want a mistress, not a teacher, Rai Bahadur. Why don't you close your school and run some other establishment that may be more in your line?'

And with that stinging slap in the face of the stupefied Rai Bahadur she walked out, banging the door behind her.

The problem of poverty was acute enough but worse than it was this constant feeling of being hunted by male eyes. At home and in college Parvati had had an almost sheltered life, coming into contact with only a small

group of men who were generally restrained and well-mannered. Now and then a boy would leave a flower on her desk or a silly little note full of sugary sentimentality. Parvati never took such minor emotional aberrations seriously. But in this wider, work-a-day world she found direct, suggestive glances. Wherever she went, even in school and Government offices, she was greeted with a look that clearly said, "We know you modern girls don't mind a thing like that. So what about it?" and felt the hot breath of sensuous desire on her cheek. And instead of being seduced she was frightened and angered. All the militant feminism of her mother revolted against this attitude which treated woman as a plaything for the satisfaction of man's ego. The unpleasant incident involving the School Secretary was by no means a rare phenomenon. She let go many a job because she felt the all too eager employer was not interested in her intellectual attainments alone. But the spectre of continued unemployment pursued her relentlessly. To keep body and soul together, no less than to escape unwelcome contact with sex-hungry males, she must soon get a secure job. But what job?

And then, just as she was about to give up all hope, the solution of her problems presented itself. She was walking along the Parade in the evening when she saw a boy carrying a sandwich-board on which there was the colour drawing of a more than half-naked dancer. With curious eyes she read :

Grand Gala Opening At Grand Theatre MISS ROOPMATI

Supported by a Galaxy of Beautiful Dancers in
popular and classical dances

Organizer.

NATRAJ RATAN

Nataraj Ratan ! Where had she heard this name ? And then it all came back in a flash. The aftermath of her dance performance in college. The chorus of congratulations. The noise and the laughter. And amidst this welter of many voices, a rather oily man with elongated side-whiskers walking up to her and shouting, "Miss Parvati, my name is Nataraj Ratan." So the man with the wet paw was now in Cawnpore, the man who had said, "I'll give you five hundred rupees a month if you join my troupe," the man whom (Parvati remembered with a sinking feeling) she had so brusquely and tactlessly thrown out. Yet there was a chance and she would be foolish not to try because of that unpleasant episode. It was even possible that he had forgotten all about it.

Within an hour she was at the Grand Theatre and when she got admitted to Nataraj Ratan's office he cordially extended his hand. But this time Parvati did not escape contact with it by doing *namaskar* instead. After all if she was going to work for this man there was no point in snubbing him at the very start. She grabbed the perspiring hand and shook it warmly as if he was an old friend. Then she did the most foolish thing imaginable at the start of a business transaction with a would-be employer. She told him the truth. Everything. Her mother's death. Her need for a job. The weeks of

anguish and despair. If she had been shrewd and experienced she would have observed an immediate change in the impresario's attitude to her. Gone in an instant was the air of deference due to a haughty young Society lady. Instead there was in the eyes the steely glint of satisfaction at finding the prey walking into the trap. Now there was no need to offer her five hundred rupees a month. He would, of course, take her on. She would be an asset to his troupe. But before that he would teach her a lesson, this proud girl who once practically had him thrown out of her room and was now asking him for a job!

"Miss Parvati," he began in his usual oily manner, carefully choosing his words, "It is a pity that you did not join my troupe at that time. Then I was in desperate need of a principal dancer. Since then I have secured Miss Roop-mati. Now it is difficult to find a suitable place for you."

Unfamiliar with the common business trick of bargaining and haggling, Parvati rose to go. "Then I am sorry" Mr. Nataraj Ratan, for wasting your time ...

"Oh", please sit down, please! "He was afraid he had over-done his part. She might have taken him at his word and walked out. "It is difficult, of course, but where a talented artiste like you is concerned (even Parvati was not proof against flattery) we can always make an exception."

"So does that offer still hold good?"

"Of course, of course. The only trouble is about the money part of it. Under the present circumstances it is not possible for us to take up an expensive new artiste, but if you would care to start with—let's see, two hundred rupees a month..."

Parvati now vaguely sensed the rules of the game. But she could not afford to play it. Nataraj Ratan's dance troupe, it was clear, could do without her but she could hardly last another week without a job. Moreover, two hundred rupees could not be despised when so recently one had been offered twenty five rupees for the more arduous teaching work in schools. And a not inconsiderable factor was the reawakening of her interest in dancing—dancing before the audience, to the tune of public applause!—that had been lying dormant within her for the last several months. She accepted the offer and from the alacrity with which Nataraj Ratan produced the contract form and got it signed, and the promptness with which he agreed to advance half a month's salary, it was clear that he knew he was grabbing a bargain.

As Parvati was about to leave, the door opened and admitted a slightly plumpish, darkish woman of about thirty with seductive curves. The ex-student of the medical college cast a professional glance at the anatomy of the new-comer and took in the sensuously pointed breast threatening to burst the low-cut blouse, the exaggerated hips, the slim ankles and the well-developed legs that could be guessed through the georgette sari. The lips had been given sensuous dimensions with the help of lip stick, the cheeks were aflame with rouge, there was mascara in the eyes, the eye-brows were but faint pencilled curves, and yet Parvati found that the face behind this mask of make-up was childish—the face of a pouting naughty, easily provoked little girl.

"Hello, Roopa—" blurted the impresario, "I mean Miss Roopmati, Meet Miss Parvati."

"Hello!", languorously drawled the dancer and held out a manicured hand.

Even as she shook hands with Roopmati, Parvati knew she was being appraised by critical, hostile eyes. She felt embarrassed at this cold scrutiny and, saying something about how pleased she was to meet the great dancer and that she was looking forward to further meetings on the stage, she hurried out of the room. But as she closed the door she saw the fire of antagonism in Roopmati's eyes. The cat was arching her back and growling at the approach of a rival.

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THE Roopmati-Parvati feud developed with amazing rapidity and manifested itself in a dozen different ways every day. Sometimes it might be just a subtle nuance of accent a way of pronouncing the casual "Oh, hello", a mere lifting of the eye-brows, a glance, a wink, a wise-crack. More serious, however, was the attempt to "steal" each other's dances, and in group ensembles where both appeared together the shrewd eyes in the audience could sense an undercurrent of bitter rivalry beneath the surface of the dance. Roopmati was clearly the aggressor but Parvati, on the defensive, was learning to hit back. The difficulty lay in her poor equipment for the fray. Off stage she could show her contempt for the "low-born" dancing girl (the rationalist Parvati was not above thinking in terms of such snobbery!) by a superior air of indifference, on the stage she relied on her better knowledge of dance technique, the more refined rhythm of her movements, her meticulous, conformity to each little

detail of the dance routine, to expose by comparison the crudity and banality of her rival's dancing—the difference between a dancer and a 'dancing girl'! Roopmati however, had a big repertory of stage tricks up her sleeve which ensured her popularity. She knew little about dancing in the classical style beyond a few stereotyped movements and gestures that she had learnt by assiduous practice. But in her body was infinite nerve and vitality. She danced with unabashed abandon and she had the knack of giving a sexy flavour to every little gesture and movement of hers. Parvati disdained this blatant vulgarisation of art but even she could not fail to see that it worked with the audience. And while an expertly executed difficult movement or eloquently expressed *mudra* on her part brought the smile of appreciation to the faces of a few connoisseurs in the first row, a well-timed wink of Roopmati brought the entire house down.

Not only with the audiences but also with the other members of the troupe—the male dancers, the chorus girls the musicians, the electricians and stage hands Roopmati was definitely more popular. She had a big smile for all and a hearty laugh that went echoing through the hall during rehearsals and kept every one amused and in good spirits. She did not mind exchanging wisecracks and jokes that bordered on the vulgar. Parvati ascribed all this to Roopmati's "low" origin and had no desire to seek popularity on such terms. For herself she was pleasant in a dignified and reserved way but also never chummy. She would not fraternize with the illiterate and vulgar crowd and did not mind if they regarded her as a snob and a kill-joy.

And so it went on for a year as the troupe made the round of India—from Cawnpore to Calcutta, Madras, Hyderabad, Mysore, Bangalore, Poona and finally settled down for a long run in several different theatres of Bombay. Parvati had always enjoyed travelling. The sense of speed in a fast train exhilarated her as she leaned out of the window, her hair flying in the wind like a dark banner of revolt, looking at the rushing panorama of her beloved country. A train journey excited her senses in the same manner as did dancing. It made her young blood course madly through the veins, and her healthy, ripe body tingle with strange sensations. Forbidden desires, nameless cravings, an ebbing tide of tenderness, a flood of passion, rose from the fathomless depth of her elemental nature and threatened to drown her. Parvati discovered that the mimicry of passion was at once a sedative and an intoxicant, it both satisfied and disturbed her. It awakened desire in other and sharpened the edge of one's own desire. The constant change of scene,—new places, new faces,—tended to weaken the conventional restraints which generally keep human passions in leash. Parvati was disturbed, almost frightened. She was frightened by the host of admirers who assailed her in every town—rich young philanderers, sex-starved college boys, sentimental poets, Bohemian artists—each trying to break through the defences of a naturally reserved and fastidious nature. She was frightened by the amorous glances of Nataraj Ratan which seemed to reflect a constant question mark, "How long, my dear have I to wait?" But most of all she was afraid of herself.

And then, a few days after their arrival in Bombay, the Roopmati-Parvati feud came to a head. The kettle of mutual antagonism, heated by the flame of jealousy, now boiled over and burst open the lid. The first programme had been arranged at one of the best known theatres of the city and Nataraj Ratan expected a big and discriminating audience. A shrewd impressario that he was, he knew that the artistic standards of Bombay theatre-goers were far above those of the other towns they had been playing. Mere display of Roopmati's sexy acrobatics would not be enough. If he had to make a name for his troupe in Bombay a superior, more artistic dancing was required. And Parvati alone could provide it. Parvati, *not Roopmati!* So he sat down and made up a new programme, soft-peddalling Roopmati's popular dances and highlighting Parvati's classical items. Then he sent for Parvati and informed her that for the Bombay season she would appear on the top of the advertisements.

"But what about the salary, Mr. Nataraj Ratan?" Parvati had to make a special effort to strike the commercial note.

"Oh, yes, of course. We are giving you an increment of a hundred rupees. And we are sure that you will soon prove that you deserve every penny of it." And he gave her a look that clearly meant that by good dancing alone she would not be able to earn her increment. But Parvati had got used to her employer's mildly insistent, almost pathetic, attempts at seducing her and was in no mood to pick up a quarrel on this day of signal triumph. Yes, it was a day of triumph, for at last Roopmati had been vanquished.

The afternoon as she was busy trying on some dresses for the new dances, the dressing-room door flew open and in burst Roopmati. She was clearly in a rage, almost foaming at the mouth. Her unpainted face was flushed scarlet with anger and in the bright black eyes were the naked flames of hatred. Before Parvati could say anything she had begun the tirade.

"You, you cat, you vixen! You call yourself a lady and yet you are not ashamed to sneak behind me and stab me in the back. You bitch, you..." And a stream of the dirtiest abuses flowed off the tongue, shocking Parvati beyond speech. Like one in a trance, she listened spell-bound, fascinated by the colourful vulgarity of this strange new language which she had never heard before. Seeing Roopmati indulging in this orgy of abuses she felt a cynical disdain, rather than bitter indignation, a complacent sense of moral superiority. The dancing girl was revealing herself in her true colours and, by her dignified silence, Parvati was making the vulgar woman's abuses recoil on her, making her feel that here was a lady who could not be provoked into descending so low even in self-defence.

The strategy worked, for Roopmati shouted, "Why don't you reply, or am I too low even to be abused by you?"

Parvati wanted to reply. "Yes, you are," but then a strange thing happened. Roopmati who had tired herself out by her hysterical outburst suddenly stopped, stared blankly in front of her and then, flinging herself on a sofa, burst into tears. She cried aloud and convul-

sively, presenting a pitiable sight as her whole body rocked with each spasm of the fit. Parvati was taken aback by this stormy turn in the situation. Was it a piece of realistic acting put up by a professional actress? Or was it a spontaneous reaction of a highly strung and undisciplined mind? But as she wondered, she heard Roopmati muttering through her sobs, "Today you have been made the principal dancer. Tomorrow I may be given the sack. But what do you care? *You* have never sat in a brothel, offering yourself for sale to any dirty, diseased loafer, with a couple of rupees in his pocket who passes by. But *I* have and I know what it is like to turn body into a cesspool of vice and disease... I don't know why a lady like you took to this profession. For you it must be no more than an interesting interlude and an exciting adventure. For me it is an escape from living hell! You don't know what that hell is like." Roopmati continued to mutter in this strain, her voice becoming more and more indistinct. She was receding farther and farther in the fourth dimension of consciousness. Soon, exhausted and pent out, she fell into a restless sleep, pursued by the demons of fear in her dreams, for every now and then a low, agonised moan would escape from quivering lips.

Parvati watched her rival slipping into a coma, then she rose and looking about as if afraid of being observed got a cushion and placed it under Roopmati's head. Then she placed a tender hand on the fevered brow and with her handkerchief gently wiped away the tears that streaked over the sleeping woman's face. And looking at it,

Parvati was reminded of their first encounter in Nataraj Ratan's office in Cawnpore. It *was* the face of a little girl behind the mask of a vixen. But it was the face of a child grown precocious through suffering and brutal contact with life at too early an age. Like a flower plucked before it had had a chance to blossom thrown into the dust and trampled underfoot, torn and begrimed but a flower all the same. Over the childlike face time had drawn deep lines, which were generally hidden under a thick coating of paint and powder but now lay revealed in the pitiless light of the afternoon sun, the map of a human life. How could she hate anyone who had suffered so much as those premature wrinkles revealed—and suffered because of the ruthless laws of a man-made world which condemns women, even tender girls, to be sacrificed at the altar of masculine passion?

Parvati's instinctive sympathy for suffering humanity reasserted itself, coupled with her feminism, the burning indignation against the fate of millions of her unfortunate sisters, and in an instant all traces of jealousy had evaporated. Roopmati was no longer a vulgar and cheap dancing girl standing in the way of her artistic glory. She was the symbol of all the women who had suffered at man's hands through the ages. On a wave of tenderness Parvati's heart went to the sleeping woman. She had found a friend in need, an ally who must be reinforced.

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IN the days to follow Parvati had frequent occasions to wonder if her own natural sympathy had not conjured up an exaggerated picture of Roopmati as a victim of social inequity. It was true that she had sought a dancing career to escape a life of shame. But was it a reassertion of moral values or merely the desire for the glamour of a dance career? In a fit of over-flowing self-pity she had told Parvati everything about herself, and the ardent feminist was shocked to learn that the escape from one kind of slavery had been effected through another; and who could say if the price paid had been worth while? The various go-between, stage manager, proprietors of theatrical companies, including Nataraj Ratan himself, each had exacted his toll. They had laughed at her early scruples. "A moralist bred in a brothel? Ha! Ha! That's a good joke my dear!" But Parvati was shocked not only by cruel, insensitive ways of man but the acquiescence of the woman. She was yet too much of a moral snob to appreciate how a continued life of enforced promiscuity saps one's self-respect, wears down one's moral defences, how one gives in to lascivious advances for the very shame of having to discuss one's sordid past. Even apart from this aspect of her life, Roopmati also seemed to have brought with her from the brothel a gnawing sexual hunger that demanded continuous satisfaction. To Parvati it was horrifying that her new friend seemed to

have had an "affair" in practically every big town they had visited.

And yet, however disappointed in Roopmati's animal morals, Parvati did not regret the truce they had arrived at. A friendless life is soul-destroying and after an experience of it, to have any kind of friend is to come into the sunlight from the gloom of an underground cell. Roopmati was an entertaining companion, always gay and in good spirits never quiet for a moment. And, once the two girls had suspended hostilities, Parvati was enveloped in an atmosphere of utmost friendliness every member of the troupe treating her with comradely consideration instead of the cold respect they had accorded her so far. No doubt a hint dropped by Roopmati was responsible for the transformation. Also Parvati discovered her new friend to possess a heart that had been softened by its own sufferings. Roopmati would have protested if someone had accused her of possessing a charitable disposition but it was a fact that she freely gave money to any carpenter, electrician or stage-hand who came along with a plausible enough distress story. No street singer, beggar or waif returned empty-handed from her door. In this there was a touch of superstition, too, and she would ask every *fakir* and *sadhu* to bless her and pray for her. The sense of sin, begotten of a life of shame, had given her a strange faith in religion, and the agnostic Parvati was amused to see that before going on the stage to give one of her suggestive, sexy dances, Roopmati always prayed for success before a little image she kept on her dressing table !

But there were other things too that occupied Parvati's thoughts. Among them was herself. Since their arrival in Bombay her popularity and success as a dancer had created quite a few problems for her. The critics had written about her in glowing terms, the public had applauded her dances and after each show her dressing room had been besieged by admirers, autograph hunters, bogus art pedants, inquisitive busy-bodies. Invitations poured in and among them were some well-known cultural associations and art academies; and Nataraj Ratan, the shrewd impresario, thought it would be good publicity if she attended such functions held in her honour. Parvati, starved of intellectual society since her mother's death, welcomed such opportunities, particularly the contracts with the student world. It made her feel younger, purer, to be moving among them once again. For a little while at least she could shed the role of the "great dancer" and, in the atmosphere of culture and art that she had known, be just a gay young woman, talk and laugh freely, discuss things and give expression to her own views on life and art and politics. The free soul that had been kept repressed in the uncongenial atmosphere of the dance troupe now burst forth through self-imposed restraints. Parvati was neither prudent nor sophisticated and now in the first flush of her success and new-found freedom it hardly occurred to her that her innocent conduct could lead to misunderstandings, perhaps even embarrassing situations.

She had been brought up in an atmosphere of equality. To her, man was neither a strange nor a frightening animal. She talked to men of education and intelli-

gence without any coy reserve or false modesty, her rationalism prompted expression of her views on life and love rather forcefully, and one who had learnt everything about human anatomy naturally did not feel shy while discussing the physical implications of love—about unequal marriages, divorce, birth control, even prostitution and venereal diseases. To Parvati all of these were important human problems which could not be solved unless they were discussed freely, frankly, fearlessly. Her admirers, however, reacted differently. Educated they were but their minds were still not free from the superstitions and prejudices inherited from their ancestors. They called themselves modern and rational but their modernism seldom went beyond fashionable clothes, their rationalism was an excuse for imbibing liquor. Of course, they were charmed by Parvati's frank behaviour, by her intelligence and vivacity. She was challenging their minds, instead she set their hearts on fire. They interpreted her rational views to mean that she believed in—and perhaps practised—promiscuous free love, that she was “game” for a short term “affair”. And there were at least half a dozen young men, each firmly convinced in his mind that she was particularly “sweet” on him!

One of these was Narendra, one of the many young men in uniform she saw around the town. He was a Lieutenant in the army, good-looking smart, intelligent. He had joined up, as he confessed, “for the sheer fun of it.” He was the healthy, athletic type, but at college he had dabbled in art too, and knew a little about everything—books, music, painting and dance, Parvati found his air of self-confidence both provocative and delightful.

They had been introduced at a party and the young man in khaki uniform had made no attempt to conceal his interest in the dancer. Parvati was human enough to be flattered by the attentions of so engaging a person and within a few minutes they were talking with the easy informality of their generation

"Look here, why don't you come round to the C. C. I. some time when you are free?" He had shot the invitation with characteristic nonchalance.

"C. C. I. ? What is that ?" She was frankly puzzled.

"Don't tell me you haven't heard of the C. C. I. ? It means, of course, the Cricket Club of India."

"*Cricket* Club of India !" She innocently exclaimed. "What would I do there ? I don't play cricket."

"Ha. Ha. Ha. That's a good one. The best crack, in fact, that I have heard about the good old club."

And so she went to the C. C. I. with Lieutenant Narendra and was initiated into the esoteric circle of Bombay "Society". She was appalled at what she saw. An institution intended for the encouragement of healthy out door sport turned into a veritable casino for drinking, dancing and gambling. Narendra proudly showed her round the club—the Ball Room, the Card Room, the Billiard Room, Dining Room, Governor's Pavillion, but the only thing she fascinated her was the beautiful swimming pool. And as they walked round, Narendra quite self-consciously proud of the celebrated dancer he was escorting, gaily responding to the greetings of friends and acquaintances, he pointed out the various celebrities to Parvati. This one was the Maharajah of a

minor State in Rajputana. That one was a mill-owner. There were it seemed, stock-brokers, race horse-owners, merchants, Government officials, film stars and a large number of "boys" in the Army, Navy and Air Force uniforms—but no cricket-players ! As they returned to the tea table that her host had got reserved in the verandah overlooking the emerald-green lawn and were about to sit down, Narendra nervously exclaimed "There she comes Now, may god have mercy on our souls!"

Parvati turned round and saw a large-sized, over-painted woman in a bizarre sari coming in their direction. Soon she had overtaken them.

'Oh hello, Narendra darling, where have you been all these days ?' And then turning to Parvati. "Do you mind if I sit down." Without waiting for her assent, she pulled a chair and kept babbling on as she sat down. "Narendra, where are your manners ? Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend ?"

'Oh, yes, of course. Miss Parvati Premchand. Mrs. Mukandlal.'

"Just call me Prema. That's what everyone around here calls me. By the way, Aren't you the dancing girl—sorry, I mean the celebrated dancer—who is appearing at the Excelsior this week ?"

Parvati knew that a deliberate attempt was being made to insult and provoke her; but she could take care of herself in any such duel of wits. "Well, I suppose you can call me a dancing girl. After all I do dance and *I am still a girl.*"

The last words, uttered by Parvati with mischievous emphasis, stung Mrs. Mukandlal who clearly had left the

girlhood far, far behind. For a moment there was tense silence, Narendra thinking hard how to liquidate the embarrassing situation. Then there was a sudden crash and the orchestra in the ball-room burst into a lively tango. The manicured fingers of the sophisticated woman beat a tattoo on the table to the rhythm of the music, the rather dull eyes behind artificially blackened eye-lashes acquired a glint of excitement. Mrs. Mukandlal rose to go.

"Guess I must be getting along. I have already promised this dance to someone. Aren't you two going to dance?"

"No, thanks, I don't go in for western dancing," Parvati politely replied.

"Well, isn't that cute? The dancer who doesn't dance!" And, giggling at her own humour, she went towards the dance floor, her elephantine hips swaying already.

Narendra apologised for her rudeness and volunteered information about her past. "She is a rich widow. She was married at an early age to an old millionaire and they had a very unhappy marital life. Three years ago he died, leaving her a big property and since then she has been running riot, trying to catch up with all that she missed in the fifteen years of her married life. She has a special weakness for anyone in uniform. Not a bad sort, really, but being no longer young she is terribly jealous and cannot bear competition."

From where they sat they could watch the dance that was proceeding now at a hot pace. Parvati was amused to see this ridiculous mass of humanity, jammed

together so that there was hardly any place to move and most of the time the dancers were content to hug their partners and sway their hips without taking a single step. And it was shriekingly funny to see serious-faced old men and plump matrons pantingly trying to enjoy themselves.

"So you have really never danced a fox-trot or a tango?" Narendra asked.

"No, only *Kathakali* and *Bharat Natya*!"

"And you never drink?"

"No."

"And never even smoke?"

"No."

"You are really a strange person. Not like a dancer at all."

"May be you are right, though I would like to remind you that dancers are just human beings. Like anyone else. But tell me about yourself. You don't look like a military man yourself. Have you seen any fighting yet?"

"No. Not yet. But soon I may have to. As you might have read in the papers an offensive has just started in North Africa. We are expecting orders any day."

Parvati's mind was full of doubts about the war business. For the last fifteen months she had been reading about it in the papers, hearing of it over the portable short-wave radio set she always carried along with her. She had been deeply moved by the terrible accounts of the Blitz on Britain and thrilled by the story of Dunkirk.

But how and where and why did India come into this picture? Why should Indian soldiers and officers be fighting in Libya, Somaliland and all the other strange places in the African desert? Why should Narendra have to go there? But she desisted from expressing these thoughts to him. There was no point in creating doubts in the mind of a man on the way to the front—may be to have his candle of life snuffed out by a German or Italian bullet! Indeed, it would be cruel. She only said, "I wish you all luck, Narendra," and out of the tenderness of her heart she decided to be very friendly with him for the little while that he would be allowed before being thrown before the wolves of war.

During the next few days they saw a good deal of each other though Parvati frankly told him that she had no intention of repeating her visit to the Cricket Club.

He had a car of his own—a sleek, high-powered roadster,—and he loved to take Parvati for drives, speeding at eighty miles an hour just because he liked to watch her hair flying in the wind. One full-moon night, after the show, he asked her if she would like to go for a drive to Juhu and the prospect of watching the moonlit sea was too much for Parvati to resist. Soon Narendra's car was eating up the silvery ribbon of the suburban road, and tired, after the nervous strain of the show, she abandoned herself to the soft luxury of the cushions and closed her eyes. Expert driver that he was, he steered with one hand and—was it by accident that the other gently fell over Parvati's hand? It was nice and soft and the touch

was quite soothing. She saw no harm in it. And in any case, she was too exhausted to protest or even withdraw her hand. The magic of the moon-kissed landscape, the cool breeze and the soft purr of the car induced her to relax and the fleecy clouds of sleep closed in upon her.

When she awoke, she found the car was already parked in a lonely spot among the palms and—Narendra was kissing her passionately! In a flash she was awake and had pushed him away. She did not like the sensual look that she saw on his face in the moonlight.

“Narendra, what is this? Are you mad?”

“But Parvati, I love you, darling. And I thought you too...”

“No, Narendra, we are good friends and no more. Please don’t ever do such a thing again.”

“But what is the harm? Even if you don’t love me, surely you are rational enough not to mind a little...I mean, on a night like this! Oh, dash it, Parvati, let us not be old-fashioned prudes.”

That settled it. If it was an impulse of the moment she was broad-minded enough to forgive it. If it was due to a misunderstanding, she was prepared to blame herself for having caused it by her unthinking informality. The thought that soon he would be in the firing line had roused her maternal instinct and she had only wanted to be nice to him. But this casual, cold-blooded attitude to love disgusted her. Love, the genuine emotion, for which she yearned, with which the inner-most desires of her instincts were associated—a loving, understanding, companion; a home, children! Could such petty liaison, as Narendra suggested, ever be a prelude to the grand adventure of motherhood? Never! Never!

They drove back in silence. Parvati accepted Narendra’s apologies with a gesture of indifference. In her heart she knew she had lost a friend and was sorry for it. For, as the first few moments of acute annoyance passed, she realised that this unhappy episode was not an accident but a symptom. She would have to lose many more friends like Narendra and go on losing them till she found

the one love that could protect her from all such misunderstandings. Curiously enough, Narendra's kiss had failed to excite her in the least so far as he himself was concerned, but it had reawakened the hunger in her heart for the love that was yet to come along.

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BACK in her shell, after the social interlude, Parvati threw herself into her work with a new ardour. She taught Roopmati the rudiments of classical dancing and in return tried to acquire from her some of her natural nerve and vivacity. For hours in the morning they practised together. Parvati learnt to respect Roopmati for her unfailing patience and enormous reserve of endurance. She was strong like a horse or a wrestler and never tired even after practising continuously for hours, while Parvati lost her breath if she had to demonstrate the same dance twice to her "pupil".

"You are a lazy aristocrat," Roopmati would say, "while I come from the sturdy peasant stock. For me dancing is work just like ploughing the fields or threshing rice." And that would set them talking about the folk-dances of which Parvati, the child of the city was completely ignorant. But she was fascinated by what she heard about the colourful village dances and between the two of them, they modernised several, adding them to their permanent repertory after a few experimental performances had proved popular.

Also Parvati learnt a new and engrossing game—watching her audience as she danced. It was not easy at first. She felt self-conscious and tried to forget the world beyond the footlights. But with greater experience had come a new confidence, an air of self-assurance. Now she could direct her dance steps with only one half of her mind, while the other half was watching, apprai-

sing, analysing the audience, taking note of its reactions. She recognized the 'regulars' who attended every change of programme, the discerning connoisseurs who followed each step of the dancers with critical eyes and unconscious movements of hand and head, the sensuous degenerates who gaped and grinned lecherously whenever a dancer appeared in a revealing costume. There were some who talked to their companions, nudged and winked, others who sat mute and wide-eyed with wonder. Beyond the front rows was the semi-visible mass of cheaper class patrons who could be identified by their uproarious applause, whistles, cat calls and occasionally a lewd remark hurled at the stage. But Parvati had learnt to respect such criticism of these nameless dance enthusiasts. Theirs was the popular view of art which one could not dismiss with a snobbish sneer. They perhaps did not know the difference between *Bharat Natya* and *Kathakali*, or *mudra* and *abhinaya*, but knew instinctively what was good dancing, and, when a dance theme touched upon their own life and experience as in the folk-dances, their enthusiastic reaction was spontaneous and full throated.

Since their coming to Bombay, the troupe had played at three places in the city—first at a high class theatre in the fashionable Fort area where dinner jackets and gold-border sarees predominated, then at a second run cinema house in the middle-class 'heart of the city', and finally in a tin-roofed hall in the suburbs. And every night at all these theatres, in the second or the third row, Parvati had seen the same face. It was a young, sensitive face with a stock of bushy black hair and a pair of big black eyes that suddenly became alive with interest every time Parvati came on the stage. She was flattered by the compliment implicit in the continued presence of this handsome young man, and after a few days her eyes learnt to seek him out. She tried to speculate about his identity. He was young enough to be a senior student, always dressed in flannels and a tweed sports coat of a particularly striking pattern. The broad shoulders and the informal attire indicated a

sportsman but keen eyes that followed the dance were those of an aesthete. He must be rich, of course to be able to afford a front row ticket every night for three weeks running. Parvati's mind idly wondered. Why does he come every day? Does he like me? What does he think of me? And then she would conjure up all the most flattering answers. It was an entertaining, yet harmless, game.

On the last night there was a more than usual rush for their farewell performance. Many rich and fashionable folk had condescended to come all the way to the dilapidated suburban theatre only to have a last glimpse of their favourite dancer. Would *he* too come? Of course, he must. But suppose he did not. And as the second bell rang, Parvati felt that if that unknown young man was not in his usual seat she would not be able to dance at all!

The curtain went up and Parvati glided on the stage with her usual grace. The hall resounded with applause. There was not a vacant seat and many people were content to have standing room. In the first glance the crowd appeared as a formless, shapeless grey mass enveloped in a haze of cigarette smoke. Then figures in the front rows began to disengage themselves and Parvati could recognize a few familiar faces she had first seen in the Fort area theatre. But where was *he*? As her feet spontaneously responded to the music and her limbs mechanically went through the routine of the dance, her eyes were searching, seeking, boring through the crowd. Was that he? No. It was someone else. She missed one step. The angry, impatient beat of the *tabla* reminded her of that. The eye-brows of a connoisseur in the front row went up in silent criticism. Was she nervous, off her usual good form? No, it was the floor of the stage. It was rotten. The board had become loose in several places. Her drapery was often in danger of being caught in the nails. She had already complained about it but the management seemed reluctant to invest money in repairs to satisfy what they regarded as the whims of a transient dancer. Still she had managed to dance without missing

a single step on all the six previous nights. Only she had had to be extra careful to avoid stepping on the danger spots of the flooring. Then what was the matter tonight ? Why should she keep on putting her foot exactly where the flooring had come off, missing the steps of the dance and coming dangerously near to losing her balance altogether ? Couldn't she see where she was going ? No, because her eyes were directed elsewhere her mind was not in the dance. She felt unreasonably peeved with the young stranger. If he could attend the shows on the previous twenty nights, why had he to be absent tonight ? She did not want anything from him. She certainly had not fallen in love with him. She only wanted to make sure he was there present in the hall...

And then she saw him coming pushing his way through the crowd that stood in the aisles. Her mood changed in one instant. Now she could dance with an easy mind. She would dance as she had never danced before. Recalling her mind to the demand of the music, she took a sweeping whirl but before she could complete it and recover her balance, her left foot had landed on a treacherous loose plank and in a split second of horror she saw stage rise like a surging wave of the sea and hit her on the head. Before she lost consciousness, Parvati heard the voice of Nataraj Ratan shouting from a far, "Is there a doctor in the house ?"

Two hours ? Three hours ? Four hours ? Eternity ? In the realms of unconsciousness the common standards of time suspended. Timelessness is the measure of dreams. Parvati lived several lives before her consciousness returned. On the web of flimsy gossamer that is the substance of sleep she drifted through heavens and earth, conversing with the stars and flirting with the moon, who, oddly enough, looked very much like the strange young man. But finally drifting slowly towards the frontiers of pain, she became conscious of her aching ankle and throbbing forehead. What was wrong with her ? She was dancing, then she saw the strange young man come in, then—a blank ! Yes, she must have fallen. Was she hurt ? With a sudden shock of panic she remembered that she was

hurt, perhaps grievously hurt. She forced open her eyes. A big human face, monstrously large and ghostly-looking, slowly came into the focus of her eyes. But it was the same face...anxious and yet smiling... a row of perfect teeth...the eyes...God, she must be dreaming. Parvati closed her eyes again and tried to sleep. But pain knocked too hard at the door of her mind. She opened her eyes again. That face was still there. It was still smiling. It was saying something. What was it saying ?

"You are quite all right now, Miss Premchand. You had a nasty fall but happily there is no fracture. Only a bad sprain." The voice was like soothing balm. She felt better, able to speak.

"*You* here?... are you a doctor?", she asked hesitatingly.

"Yes," he replied smilingly, "I suppose I can call myself that. I am just back from Edinburgh."

Edinburgh ? That's where she had wanted to go herself to complete her medical studies. The mention of it brought a flood of memories and might-have-beens to her mind. But he was speaking and it was good to hear him.

"I returned only three weeks ago. I have not even gone home yet."

"Why?"

"Oh, well, one thing and another detained me in Bombay. I like this city, you know." Parvati, of course, knew.

"But I must not talk too much. You must rest now." I will tell your friend, Miss Roopmati, that you are not to be disturbed." And he rose to go.

"Thank you for all the trouble you took. But...but... I don't even know your name."

"Srikant."

"So, shall I see you again, Doctor Srikant?"

"You bet you will. I can't leave my first patient like this! I am wiring home to tell my mother that professional

reasons have detained me further in Bombay." And he laughed at his own joke, an innocent, spontaneous laughter that rang in Parvati's ears like the tinkling of bells. Next moment he was gone. But he would be back again. Wasn't she lucky that he turned out to be a doctor? A doctor! He was what she had wanted to be. Can ideals be achieved by proxy? She smiled at the silly thoughts she was thinking and then, warmed by an inward glow, fell into a peaceful, dreamless sleep.

7

AH! the marriage of two souls in the springtime of youth! It is the legal, the religious, the mechanical ceremony that the world insists upon and, clutching firmly at the shadow, ignores the substance—the love that unifies two personalities, two egos, two lives, into a single pattern that is the only perfect plan for the building of a home.

Love! Parvati had often wondered whether it would come, what it would be like when it came. She knew it would fill the vacuum in her heart, release the pent-up flood of tenderness within her. She knew there was a connection between love and those mysterious urges of her nature, the hunger of her body. But little did she know that love would come to her in such unexpected glory. Now that it was here, it was like the chiming of a thousand silver bells, it was the colour of the sunset, the murmur of the sea, the merry song of birds, the melody of music, the rhythm of dance! It was more than that, for it had the flavour of friendship infinite pity and the essence of humanity. And no longer it was a mere emotion, vague and formless. Parvati could see it and touch it. She knew exactly what it looked like. It looked like Srikanth.

Like dreams and the flights of imagination, love too

wings its way regardless of the human standards of time. The distance between two persons has not been measured in the dimension of feeling but it can be halved if both meet each other half way. And when an affinity of minds is established, a mutuality of interests and unity of ideals, the formal intervening stages of acquaintanceship and friendship may be spanned in a month, in a week, in a day !

Thus it was with Parvati and Srikant. When the young doctor came to see his patient on the day following the accident, the two talked like old friends.

"And how is my first patient today ?" He asked breezily as he entered the room, his radiant smile bringing extra sunshine into the room.

"Oh, hello, Doctor Srikant. It's so kind of you to..." She was really grateful to him for his visit.

"Now, now, none of that. It's a professional visit after all. Wait till you get my bill. You won't be talking of my kindness then ! Now let's have a look at your injured little foot."

Tender but efficient fingers removed the bandages, gently felt the swollen ankle and foot.

"Nothing to worry about," he reassured her, "You will be skipping about in a few weeks."

"A few weeks ! Then, how am I going to dance ?"

"Your feet may be your fortune, madam. But you are *not* going to dance—at least for one month. For five or six days you should not even walk about." And he expertly bandaged the foot again.

Like a child who is told to go to bed early, Parvati was peeved. "I should not dance. I should not even walk. Then how am I going to pass my time?"

"You can talk. Women are generally good at that!"

"Thanks for the compliment to my sex! But Roopmati and the rest of the troupe all are leaving for Ahmedabad. If I can't go with them, then with whom am I going to talk?"

"That really is a very big problem. We will have to engage someone to talk to you—someone who is good-looking, intelligent and has a sense of humour. Till we find such a person, I suppose you will have to be content with talking to my humble self."

The peeved child was delighted. The prospect of lying in bed like an invalid was no longer annoying.

And so they talked and talked—all through the day and far into the night, both the doctor and the patient getting their meals on trays right there in the room. And they resumed their talk the next morning.

What did they talk about? What did they *not* talk about? Politics. Art. Medicine. Books. Themselves. Srikant expressed his admiration for Parvati's courage in adopting a career that was looked down upon by Society. Parvati envied Srikant for having studied medicine in the best colleges and hospitals of England, and listened with unconcealed eagerness and admiration to his plans for making use of his medical knowledge not to get a big Government job but to raise the health standards of the people. He had studied the systems of socialised medicine and public hygiene in England, America, Sweden and, particularly, in Soviet Russia, and he was impatient to try them in India. From mutual interest in each other's ideals and convictions to the happy accident of their meeting and the unexpected events that caused it. Srikant confessed that on the very day his ship arrived in Bombay he had gone to see her dance, first out of sheer curiosity, and was so fascinated that he had kept on postponing his departure for home, day after day, just for the sake of watching her dances. Parvati revealed how she had been interested in the strange young man from the very first day and her curiosity about him had increased as daily she found him among the audience. Srikant told her about his family. They were landlords of Rajnipur, a village in Eastern U. P. His father was dead the head of the family was his mother of whom Srikant spoke with great affection. He had one sister, Kamini, who had been married during Srikant's absence abroad.

It was seven years since he had seen his family and he was looking forward to the reunion with delightful anticipation. Parvati, in her turn, told him about her mother, the crusading lady doctor, and Srikant was visibly moved by the account of her heroic life.

To amuse Parvati, Srikant brought albums full of pictures that he had taken during his seven-year stay in Europe. And she saw idyllic landscapes, pretty villages and stately churches, the busy London streets and the Notre Dame in Paris. But there were other pictures that were not so pretty. Srikant had been in London during the worst days of the Blitz and worked as a volunteer doctor in emergency hospitals for air-raid victims. His camera had recorded this phase of Europe, too. Whole buildings reduced to piles of rubble, houses half blown away by bombs, entire streets in flames. And he talked to her of the fearful suspense and agony of air-raid nights, the eerie whistling of the bombs as they fell through the air, more terrible than even the crash that followed. He had come to India as a doctor on a ship in convoy of hundered vessels and he had seen not less than seven of these torpedoed and sunk by German submarines. Parvati was appalled and distressed, shaken to the roots of her being, by what she heard—the unspeakable beastliness of man. She knew the crimes of Hitler and the Nazis but her reaction was of anger and bitterness not against any particular person or country or class but against the greed and violence and hatred among people that had brought the world to the edge of doom. But stronger still was a feeling of relief—that Srikant, *her* Srikant, had come through the frightful ordeals unhurt.

Days passed. Parvati was just able to hobble around in the room but was still unable to travel along with the troupe to Ahmedabad. Natraj Ratan asked her to stay in Bombay till she was fully recovered and then rejoin them either in Ahmedabad or Karachi. Roopmati came to say farewell and inspite of her efforts at pleasant banter she seemed to be taking even a temporary parting to heart. Noticing her friend's mood, Parvati asked

Srikant to go into the other room and as the door closed behind him, Roopmati burst into tears. Joy or sorrow, she could control neither and had to give vent to her feeling in a loud and unrestrained manner. For her such emotional outbursts were like summer clouds, a brief rain of tears and then the sky was clear. Soon she was laughing and ragging Parvati about Srikant.

"You know I have a hunch that you will not rejoin the troupe." She said with mock seriousness.

"Why, do you think my leg is never going to get well enough for dancing?"

"Ram! Ram! God forbid! Don't utter such unpropitious words". The superstitious Roopmati was alarmed, much to the amusement of her sceptical friend.

'Then what do you mean I won't rejoin the troupe?'

"I mean that the doctor will kidnap his patient," adding with a significant wink, "I have seen his eyes as he was looking at you. They were full of evil designs upon you. You told me once you wanted to be a lady doctor. You might end up as a doctor's lady."

Parvati laughed, and tried to dismiss the suggestion with a self-conscious "Oh, is that why you are sorry to leave? I bet you would like to stay and add one more to your countless victims!"

With elaborate protestations of affection, hugs and kisses, Roopmati departed but left Parvati's mind in a stage of agitation. Was there any basis for the joke about Srikant's "evil designs"? It seemed too good to be true. Would he propose marriage to her? And if he did, what would be her reaction? Would she accept? Should she accept? Srikant returned and resumed the talk they were having when Roopmati interrupted them. In his attractive but matter-of-fact manner, Srikant was telling her of the latest medical theories about the treatment of mental disorders by the new science of psychiatry. Nothing could be further from romance than this highly technical jargon. Parvati watched him for the least trace of emotion but found none. Were her

fears—or hopes—groundles ? She was not sure whether she was relieved or disappointed.

An hour later Srikant left, advising her to rest. There was just a suspicion of lingering embarrassment as he hesitated before opening the door, then he took out an envelope from his pocket and said, "By the way here is my doctor's bill. Didn't I tell you it would be rather heavy ?" Saying this he handed it to her and went out. With agitated fingers she tore it open, read the brief contents in a glance. He had asked her to marry him. "I promise nothing more than that so long as I live I shall love and respect you and share my joys and sorrows with you." What more could she have wanted him to promise ? Suddenly the dark future became illuminated for Parvati. No longer was she a lonely wayfarer on this long and difficult journey of life. She had a companion, an understanding, lovable companion. After the strain of over a year of exacting self dependence, it was good to feel that she could give herself up to the protection of someone she could love and trust.

But what of her career ? Marriage would mean good-bye to dancing. After much labour and strife she had made a name for herself. Should she throw it away just as she stood on the threshold of fame ? The career woman in her conjured up temptations, invoked the ideals of the service of art. But both instinct and commonsense dismissed these objections as trivial. Love, the integration of two personalities in a new harmony, must of necessity demand sacrifices. And was it really such a big sacrifice she was called upon to make ? She loved dancing, no doubt, but she had no illusions about the dance stage as a career in India. Not that she regretted having taken it up ? She had enjoyed it and emerged with the integrity of her character and personality intact. But the strain had been too much. The moral resistance constantly required to fight temptation, flattery, scandal, intimidation and amorous advances had well-nigh exhausted her. And the emotions on the dance stage created an aching void of frustration in a

sensitive soul. Dancing had been an interesting interlude in her life but it could not be her whole life, as a medical career could have been if only it had not been denied to her. And even the sceptical Parvati thought it was perhaps destiny's law of compensation that had now sent a doctor in her life.

As for the man, Parvati felt no doubt that she was making a wise choice. Even during these few days she had seen enough of him to be convinced of that. He was intelligent, rational, kind and human. About him there was an air of instinctive refinement which reassured her that there would be nothing crude or banal in their marital life. He had a lively sense of humour and Parvati loved the way his merry eyes crinkled when he laughed. But the totality of the feelings he aroused in her defied analysis. His personality stirred in her the physical as well as emotional responses that could only be described as the strange chemistry of love. He aroused her tenderness and promised tenderness in return. She wanted to be protected by him and to protect him ! Love had come to her in all its wonder and glory. It would be madness to reject it, even if she could.

Next day they gave notice of their intention to get married to the Registrar of Civil Marriages as neither of them wanted a religious ceremony. The intervening period passed in a pink haze of happiness, the utter joy of being together, the bliss of love that does not lack security. Srikant sent a letter informing his mother that he would be arriving soon with her daughter-in-law. The nameless, formless, fear which had been secretly disturbing Parvati—"Suppose his mother doesn't like me"—was dissipated when she read his flattering description of hers in his letter. "Moreover," Srikant said with happy conviction "my mother is the sweetest, kindest creature on God's earth. She cannot help liking you and I am sure you will learn to love her as much as I do."

8

BUT a son seldom knows his mother, used as he is to idolizing her from his childhood and to looking at her through the coloured glasses of affection. After seven long years abroad, Srikant saw his mother, Ramadevi, only in the perspective of loving memory. He remembered her as a gentle, grey-haired, softly-spoken and religious-minded widow in white *sari*, who lavished inordinate affection on her only son. She was sometimes angry with her daughter who had been brought up in accordance with a strict code of respectable behaviour but for her son she had never a word of even the mildest disapproval. After the death of his father, Srikant had learnt to depend for everything on his mother, giving her all the love that might have been divided between the two parents. And *Mataji*, as the old lady was called by the entire household—by children and servants alike—had sought relief from the grief of widowhood in her love for son and interest in his future. Srikant still remembered with the amused embarrassment attached to all such childhood memories how his mother used to say, "My dear little Srikant, he is my bridegroom."

Little did the son know, however, about the deeper, more characteristic motifs of his mother's nature—motifs that were rooted in centuries of tradition and combined in them the more enduring influences of religion and feudal aristocracy in an indistinguishable pattern.

It was the life-long habit of the devout Ramadevi to rise from her bed before the first rays of the sun lighted the eastern sky and to devote two hours to *puja*, *bhajans* and recitations from the Ramayana. When she finished she had a sparse breakfast of some fruits and vegetables and was ready for a sort of *darbar* she held every morning with the stern dignity of a queen. The servants came one by one and offered their *namaskar*, the estate manager appeared with his usual tale of unremitted

land-rent, the exacting collectors of the *sarkar* and the growing impudence and rebellious tendencies of the *ryot*. He was given precise instructions and in dealing with her recalcitrant peasants she seldom tempered justice with mercy. In charity there was none to excel her. At every festival she fed a hundred Brahmins, and there was no temple, no *dharamshala*, no *gaoshala* in the entire neighbourhood that did not get regular donation from her. But she did not allow her charitable instincts to modify the rigid slave-and-master discipline of the Zemindari system. Indeed, she lacked an analytical mind and, therefore, she was neither interested in nor did she understand human motives. According to her, life was organized on the basis of a set of traditional imperatives—this should be done, that should not be done!—that had behind them the dual sanction of religious dogma and feudal economy. And the line of demarcation between the two was very thin, almost imperceptible. Religion, through perpetuation of caste, had secured the dominant position of the aristocracy, and the grateful aristocracy, in its turn, used its material privileges to help and strengthen the religious institutions. The priest and the zemindar were sworn allies and comrades-in-arm. Between them they had ruled the peasants for centuries and hoped to continue doing so for ever and ever.

There was a third factor in the village community, however, that demanded a share in the spoils. He was the money-lender. There was not a peasant who did not cringe before him because every one of them was in debt to him and had no hope of ever getting a release from the burden. Even the majestic Ramadevi could not dismiss the wily-eyed *baniya* with the same imperious brusqueness that she used for the peasants, though she had the feudal lord's contempt for this unscrupulous usurer. For the zemindar's widow was herself in debt to the money-lender—a total of nearly eighty thousands, principal and interest, borrowed on different occasions, repaid partly at each seasonal rent-collection, but the outstanding never decreased, ever increased in geometrical progression

through the magical calculations of compound interest. The money had been borrowed partly for Srikant's education and partly for Kamini's marriage.

"*Huzoor*", a servant announced as Ramadevi was about to dismiss her court one morning, "the *Mahajan* has come".

A wrinkle of annoyance appeared on the aristocratic brow beneath the silvery hair. A visit from the money-lender was never welcome. Today it was particularly ominous. But aristocrats are trained to mask their feelings and Ramadevi was an expert. The wrinkle of annoyance smoothed itself out. "Send him in".

The man of money, slimy hypocrite, ultra-respectful, whining, maliciously abasing himself as if to mock at the mighty, who were in his grip, entered with an obsequious "*Ram Ram, Mataji*".

"What is it, Rameshwar Dayal?" And she motioned him to a seat

"Nothing. nothing at all, *mataji*, I only came to have your *darshan* and enquire after your health."

Ramadevi knew he was lying; but with unruffled dignity allowed him to continue. "I hear the *Chhotey Sarkar* is coming back from *Vilayet*. It is a happy day for all of us, I assure you."

"Yes, thanks to Lord Sri Krishna, my Sri has safely reached Bombay and should be here in a couple of days."

The man of money coughed unnecessarily to cover the embarrassment of having to reveal the business motive of his visit. Then he hit upon a happy angle of approach. "I hear our *Chhotey Sarkar* has become a big doctor. Now he can surely become a Civil Surgeon and earn thousands of rupees. And then ..eh... of course, I need hardly mention such a trifling thing..."

There was no need for him to mention the trifling eighty thousands. Ramadevi understood. "Yes, Rameshwar Dayal, you need have no worry on account of your dues. They will be paid with the least possible delay."

Having achieved the object of his visit, he withdrew, leaving Ramadevi slightly disturbed. This debt *was* a bother. What with the peasants defaulting with their payments of rent and running away to the cities to work in factories, the tremendous cost of Srikant's education and the amount spent of Kamini's wedding, she had to humiliate herself by borrowing money from the low-born *baniya*. But now it would be all right. Srikant was back and soon she would arrange his marriage. She had already a suitable bride in view, the daughter of a neighbouring zemindar, Thakur Harnam Singh. The girl's father was of an equal status and moreover he owned a sugar mill. She would exact a dowry of no less than thirty thousands for her son. And why not? Wasn't her son handsome, England-educated, a prospective Civil Surgeon? Boys who went into the Civil Service got as much as fifty thousands. No, she must get at least thirty thousands, if not forty, for her son!

The morning *darbar* over, Ramadevi went to her room for a little rest before the midday meal. She had hardly rested her head on the pillow when Sukhda, the old maid-servant, entered and handed her a letter. A glance at the envelope and the familiar handwriting caused Ramadevi's countenance to be wreathed in smiles. It was from her Sri. He must have written to say by what train he was coming. The mother's wrinkled hand trembled with joy as she tore open the letter. But the next moment the smile vanished, in its place came clouds of disappointment gathering over the sensitive, patrician face into dark fury. She read the letter a second time, then folded it back into the envelope with her usual calm fastidiousness. But in her eyes was the doom of a lifetime's hopes.

Sukhda who had grown up with Ramadevi since her childhood and was privileged to be a confidante of the lady of the house broke the oppressive silence. "Bad news, *Mataji?*"

"Yes, bad news, Sukhda. Very bad news!" Ramadevi was almost thankful to the maid-servant for giving her an opportunity to spit out the growing poison of bitterness.

"Our *Chhotey Sarkar*, may our Lord Sri Krishna protect him, is he all right?"

"Yes, he is quite all right. But I wish I had received news of his death rather than hear of this black mark he has put on the forehead of the entire family. He has married some vile dancing girl in Bombay and is bringing her with him tomorrow. To think that my son returned unspoilt after seven years in the godless *Vilayet*, and then got trapped by some cheap harlot in Bombay—it is more than I can bear in this old age. And married her not with a proper religious ceremony but according to accursed law which requires both parties to renounce their ancestral faith."

And it did seem that day, as Ramadevi continued to sit mute and broken-down in her room, that the burden of age which she had been so bravely shouldering had suddenly proved too much for her and prostrated her. Ever since her husband's death, she had been kept going by her inherited pride; the necessity of piloting the ship of the family had given her both courage and intuition and religious faith had sustained her. But Srikant's letter had at one blow struck at all these props of her life—family pride, religion, convention! For the first time during her widowhood she felt alone, utterly defeated, betrayed. Yes, Srikant had betrayed her. But how could he, her beloved son, so innocent, brought up in such a pious and religious atmosphere, how could he commit such an infamy? It was unthinkable. He must have been mad and bewitched—yes, that must be the reason. That woman—that vile creature—had used some magic to bewitch her son. This solution of the mystery at once absolved her son and directed her concentrated wrath against a third person. But it did not remedy the harm that had already been done to the hitherto blameless reputation of the family. Of course, the hot-blooded Thakurs had sometimes kept dancing girls as mistresses but then a mistress was a mistress and a wife was a wife. To seek an outlet for abundant masculinity through such woman was excusable. But to bring one of them in one's house as a wife—why, that was an unpardonable sin against all the

laws of man and God! As for Srikant's flattering description of this woman who had been the cause of his downfall, Ramadevi attached no importance to it. That she was educated made her all the more vicious—street women were these days seducing their daughters to ensnare decent and simple-hearted young men like Srikant! And to think that this woman without virtue flaunted a name like Parvati—the sacred name of a goddess!—why, it was sheer sacrilege!

As the entire household buzzed with whispered scandal, Ramadevi continued to sit locked-up in her room. She passed the day without food, the night without sleep. When she felt tired she had recourse to prayer, repeating all the *mantras* and *shlokas* she knew with fanatical ardour, as if reinforcing the bastions of her home against the intruder expected in a few hours.

The morning sun came, vaulting over the eastern mango-grove, but no peace to Ramadevi's troubled, tortured soul. Sukhda timidly entered the room and announced that Srikant had arrived.

"Is his... that woman with him?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Put them up in the outer male quarters. I don't want her to step into my house."

"Yes, my lady, I have done so already. But your son asks permission to pay his respects to you along with his..."

Ramadevi could not bear to hear the sacred word, "wife" applied to that woman. "Tell Sri he can come and see me alone." And in that one word "alone" was all the authority of an aristocrat born to command.

9

It did not require a particularly intelligent and sensitive girl like Parvati to find out that she was un-

wanted and unwelcome in this household. With her keen perception she knew that she was opposed not by an individual—her mother-in-law—but by an entire system of life, a whole world of ideas and conduct. Ten thousand years of religious dogma were against her, the complacent psychology of feudalism, the unbending pride of aristocratic blood. Born and brought up in a different, rational and emancipated atmosphere, Parvati had only guessed at the existence of this strange world of blind faith, centuries-old prejudices, the rigid distinction of birth and vocation and caste. She knew as much about it as about the interior of the African jungle. In the geography of her experience this was a dark, uncharted continent and now she was plunged into its very depths. And it was typical of Parvati's objective mind that her first reaction was not personal but social. She was appalled by the thought that millions and millions of human beings continued to live in this atmosphere of bigotry and unreason.

But even an extrovert must turn inwards at the impact of personal suffering. And there was no doubt that Parvati was suffering even if she put up with it with a brave smile in the presence of her husband. All round her she sensed a thick wall of bitter hostility. She felt isolated, choked up.

At first Ramadevi had completely refused to see her daughter-in-law. But Srikant, by pleading and cajoling, broke down the stubborn resistance and one day she consented to let Parvati come and pay her respects. Parvati would never forget that day.

It was the strangest first meeting between a mother-in-law and her daughter-in-law. Stepping for the first time into the vast court-yard of the *zenana*, Parvati was escorted by Srikant to one side where bamboo *chiks* screened the verandah.

"*Mataji*", Srikant gaily called out from the threshold, "Your daughter-in-law has come to meet you."

A weak yet imperious voice answered, "Come-in." And they walked in.

Ramadevi sat on the deer skin that served as a prayer rug. Parvati saw a patrician white-clad figure, with chiselled features of classical beauty, wrinkled with age but yet serene and majestic. This, then, was Srikant's mother. She was at once impressed by the aristocratic bearing of the old lady, the strength or character that shone through the frail face. But Parvati failed to see in that face the slightest trace of friendliness. It had the distant, aloof look of resignation to an unpleasant ordeal.

Srikant had duly tutored his wife who proceeded to touch the feet of the old lady in the approved manner of dutiful daughters-in-law. Then she awaited the pleasure of her majesty.

"Sit down." came the order and Parvati took a seat.

"Well, *Mataji*," Srikant tried to strike the informal, homely note, "what do you think of your daughter-in-law?"

The old lady was silent for a moment, then heaved a sigh, and spoke with bitter irony. "What do my likes and dislikes matter son? After all this is the twentieth century when sons choose their own wives and daughters-in-law do not even care to cover their heads in the presence of their elders."

Parvati suddenly realized that the end of the sari had slipped from her head and she hastened to cover it.

The interview was already becoming painful and Parvati felt immeasurably relieved when the old lady dismissed them by saying, "Well, it is getting late for my *pūja*," not forgetting to put a sting in the tail. "But, of course, what do you godless young people care for our *dharma* and our *pūja*?"

Since then on two other occasions Parvati had gone to see her mother-in law but every time she had been dismissed with the same haughty indifference. And now she was seriously thinking of telling Srikant that she could not suffer such humiliations any longer, and would not step in the *zenana* again.

Taking their cue, no doubt, from Ramadevi's attitude, the servants also treated Parvati with sneering respect,

their glances brazenly declared. "But for the fact that our young master has been mad enough to marry you we know what you are and what you are worth." A regular espionage system seemed to be operating all the time and when she was alone with her husband, Parvati was never sure there was no one eaves-dropping. To the female servants, who were more poisonous than the male ones, she was the subject of unending curiosity. On the slightest pretext they would sneak in, look at her thing with impudent familiarity—her clothes, her books, her jewellery, her toilette articles. They would not only look at them, they would pick up each article in their dirty fingers, smell it disdainfully, test the texture of some cloth, play with her gramophone or tinker with her radio.

"Will you *please* leave that alone?" Parvati would shout impatiently, her nerves giving way under the strain of the inquisition. And the culprit would retort in an injured tone. "All right, all right I was only looking at it! If you are so particular about your things, we won't enter your apartment even to sweep the floor." And with her nose high up in the air, the ill-mannered servant would walk out, leaving Parvati in a rage with herself for not having avoided the "incident" by a little more tact and patience.

The only oasis in the desert of hostility was Srikant, and Parvati could have borne much more for his sake. It was not merely that he treated her with unfailing kindness. Her respect and affection for him increased with every day that passed. His mind was clear-cut like a diamond, his knowledge of the world was as wide as it was deep, yet his heart had the fresh and sensitive response of a child. Parvati knew that in the matter of his mother's incorrigible attitude he was quite helpless. He was as surprised as she was when on their arrival, he discovered that his wife was not welcome in his mother's household. Since then he had repeatedly tried to argue with her but it was like knocking one's head against a stone-wall. Ramadevi kept shut not only the windows

of her mind, barring the entry of any new ideas, but—and this Srikant never before could have believed possible!—she even shut her heart against the affectionate pleadings of her son. No longer was she doting mother. She was a monarch whose authority had been flagrantly flouted and she had no intention of granting the Queen's Pardon to the culprit even if he happened to have sprung from her body, flesh of her flesh. Srikant had never suspected such hardness in his mother's character and, he confessed to Parvati, objectively he was as much fascinated as shocked by it. Within himself, he suffered—and his wife knew how he suffered!—at the hopelessness of the situation.

There were diverting and pleasant interludes. Srikant took his wife buggy-riding out the country and the city-bred girl was charmed by her first real contact with nature. New horizons opened before her eyes as they went clattering through mango-groves, rice fields, sugar plantations. The monsoon season was approaching and the sunset clouds made ever-changing, colourful patterns on the sky. New sights. New sounds. The *koel* calling his mate in the thick foliage of the mango trees. The eerie shriek of the peacock. The bleating of goat-kids, the merry tinkle of their little bells. The guttural grunts of the buffaloes. And from far away came with the breeze the sweet melody of a reed flute, gentle, undisturbing, peaceful, like the landscape itself. New smells, too. The rich, thick sweet scent of ripe mangoes. The pungent odour of guava trees. And the sweetest of all perfumes that rose from the earth with the first raindrops. Something that she had seldom suspected within herself responded excitedly to these sights and sounds and smells. Inherited memories of rural life, hitherto kept dormant by two generations of city folk, rose from the depths of her soul and she knew she had re-discovered her home. Love acquired a new meaning for her, a new meaning and a new purpose. And in a strange sort of way she felt that her love for her husband and her country were not two different emotions.

On their way back, however, Parvati expressed a desire to walk back home and the carriage was sent back with the *syce*. Hand in hand, the pair left the darkening fields and entered the main alley that passed through the village. It was like Alice of the fables and yet this was more than a wonderland, something beyond even the realms of fantasy. From the fresh, clean, rain-laden air of the open fields to the foul stench that seemed simply to ooze from the open drain in the middle of the road was a contrast that stuck Parvati like a slap in the face. She looked about her with eyes heavy with melancholy disillusion. Was this the romantic rural life she had been idealizing only a few moments ago? A dirty, uneven road full of ruts and pot-holes, the drain running into stagnant cesspools at every few steps. Low-ceilinged, dark, dingy, hovels on either side from which poured out clouds of dung smoke. Cattle and humans preparing to sleep under the same roofs. Rickety, half-starved children, spindly-legged, the ribs sticking out of their skins, weeping children, coughing children, children—girls barely twelve or thirteen—carrying in their arms children of their own! This then was the life of the peasant which poets had sung and philosophers had envied! And then a thought stung her suddenly. "Wasn't her husband and his family a part of the machine of soulless exploitation which was responsible for this sordid picture of poverty and misery? She walked back home in an agony of silence. Srikanth too seemed in a quiet mood and hardly spoke a word till they were within sight of their house and rain suddenly began to fall, drenching them both.

"Let us run, Parvati," he said, taking off his coat and throwing it over her.

Back within the shelter of their home, as the rain storm roared and thundered outside, Parvati found no peace. She was restless and depressed and hardly touched her dinner. She was waiting for the moment the servants would be gone.

"Sri, I must know this," she burst out as the maid had hardly closed the door behind her, "if I am to share

your life. How can you live in this village, amidst all this poverty and disease, and not feel guilty and ashamed? Don't you feel any responsibility for these terrible conditions? I came to live with you and share your joys and your sufferings, I have cheerfully borne the insults and humiliations your mother has poured over my head because I know you love her and because I love you. But this—that I saw today—it chokes me. It is like a deadly serpent that coils round my conscience. It is a sin against humanity and I can neither rest nor sleep so long as I know my husband is involved in it."

"I knew how you feel, Parvati dear." And Srikant's voice was soothing like an ointment for her bruised soul. There was no patronising air in it. It was comforting because it came out of a heart that was as disturbed as Parvati's own. "I know it because I have suffered for years what you suffered today. I have carried an uneasy conscience these many years, ever since I learnt to identify social wrongs. If it was any use I would give up everything this very minute and reduce myself to the level of the peasants. But if I renounced the estate it would only lapse to the next of kin and the lot of the peasants would only be worse. It is the system, Parvati, that must be changed. And I can give you my word I will do everything to change it."

And with that the short-lived storm passed away and peace returned to the two loving souls.

10

SENSITIVE social consciences are strange mechanisms. They are so easily roused by a sudden impact of reality, but then equally easily they relapse into complacent passivity. It is only when the problems of the mass touch our own individual lives that they acquire the inescapable relevance and the urgency that acquire that motivate action.

Next morning the horrid spectacle Parvati had seen in the village was only a faint nutline pushed to the back of her mind. Of course she would never have been able to live with a man who approved of or even condoned such injustice. But then Srikant's mere verbal disassociation from the system of exploitation was sufficient to soothe her disturbed conscience. Her revulsion for the grim condition of life she had observed was due only partly to her sense of social justice, keen as it was. Not an inconsiderable factor was the injury to her aesthetic and artistic nature which she had suffered. To live in proximity to such ugly and sordid and soul-disturbing surroundings would be terrible, something she could never endure. But next day when Srikant told her he was going to Allahabad to see about a job she was quite happy.

"Then we need not live like parasites on the land," she said but she meant, "Then we need not live in this dirty, filthy and backward village."

Srikant went away, promising to return within a week and Parvati was left to herself, a prisoner in that high-walled fortress of domestic tyranny. Now, more than ever before, she felt the iron hand of Ramadevi. The shadow of the old woman fell over the entire establishment. No one, nothing, could move without her knowing it, without her permission. It needed all of Parvati's patience and goodwill to endure the pin-pricks that she knew were deliberate. If she ordered the carriage to be brought, the *syce* replied he could not without the permission of *Mataji*. If she wanted a servant to go to the post-office to bring her mail, or another to prepare her bath, she received the same rude answer. The presence of Srikant had saved her from such blatant humiliations or at least softened the blows. Now she was at the mercy of the wolves of revenge and there was no way of escape.

Something occurred however, to relieve the atmosphere, Kamini, the eldest daughter, who had not been home ever since her marriage a year ago, came to see her mother and brother. Parvati was anxious to see Srikant's

sister but from her window she could only catch the glimpse of a pale, thin girl as she emerged from a curtained carriage and was swallowed by the vast unknown interior of the big house. Her husband had not come with her but there followed an imposing array of luggage—boxes and suit cases and dressing cases and jewel cases. In the wake of Kamini's arrival came a succession of servants to Parvati's rooms, bearing fantastic reports of the resplendent dresses and jewellery the young lady of the house had brought.

"Did you see that necklace? Each pearl is worth lakhs."

"And the gold ornaments must be weighing at least ten seers."

"Yes, and those gold-border sarees. The Raja Sahib brought them especially for his bride from *Vilayet*."

"And why not? Our Kamini is worthy of all that the Raja Sahib can give her. Don't forget what a grand dowry *Mataji* gave her."

The conversation was carried on in Parvati's hearing, just outside her room, with a generous use of interpretative winks and gestures of the hands, that left no doubt that their motive was to make her jealous, and humiliate her. Parvati, however, was too shrewd and disciplined in her mind to allow herself to be baited by such crude tactics. But she was intrigued by the further trend of the conversation.

"Have you seen our Kamini's high-heeled shoes. Just like the memsahibs. Not less than twenty pairs."

"Yes, and there are people", with a sniggering nod of the head in Parvati's direction. "who think no end of themselves if they have but half a dozen old pairs."

"Breeding, sister, breeding! It is as important among humans as among horses. You can't compare a true-born aristocrat with a common—well, I won't name any names."

The talk turned to other details of Kamini's luggage which were described in great detail—lavendar bottles,

silk sleeping suits, boxes full of rouge and lipsticks. And Parvati could not help wondering at the obvious incompatibility of this ultra-modern paraphernalia and the strictly orthodox atmosphere in the house. She felt a growing interest in meeting this daughter of a religious household who had obviously landed into the arms of a connoisseur of feminine allurements. She wondered if she should risk going into the *zenana* to meet Kamini. That evening Kamini herself came to see Parvati.

Parvati, after her solitary dinner, was reading the morning paper that arrived in village only late in the evening and thinking about the saneness of war news, when she heard a timid tap-top of high-heeled shoes in the verandah. Turning round she saw a pale and thin form framed in the doorway—the same girl she had seen in the morning. She was dressed in a gorgeous bird-of-paradise sari with a border over six inches broad, which only accented the slim little figure. Through the powder and lipstick could be seen an anaemic pallor on the face. This girl who was still wobbly on her ‘mules’ had not yet learnt to walk alone in the world. Timid, hesitating, shy, she was a picture of helplessness. Parvati’s heart went out to her in a sudden pang of sympathy. She got up and gave her a friendly hand.

“You are Kamini, Sri’s sister, aren’t you?” She said placing her visitor on the most comfortable chair and trying to save her from the embarrassing ordeal of self-introduction. Then Parvati noticed the girl shyly eyeing her, from head to foot, with a rather puzzled, almost bewildered, expression.

“Why do you look at me so, sister?” Parvati asked but not unkindly, “Are you surprised—or, may be disappointed.”

“No, no,” Kamini burst out, coming out of her shell of shy reserve, “I am very glad to see you. But—but—I did not expect you to be so simple and kind. Even your dress is too plain for a—”

“For a dancer, you mean?”

Kamini detected the slight touch of irony that had crept into Parvati's tone almost in spite of herself. It was spontaneous reflex action, the self-respect of a career woman on the defensive.

"No, no," and there was genuine repentance in Kamini's words, "believe me I did not mean that. But I hear you are so highly educated and hold modern views, yet you are dressed in a plain white sari and ordinary *chappals* instead of high-heeled shoes. You haven't applied lipstick or even powder."

"But, my dear sister," Parvati said with a chuckle, highly amused by such disarming but childlike *naivete*, "Is it necessary to wear high-heeled shoes and a gold-border sari if one is educated and modern-minded?"

"I am myself quite ignorant because I was not given much education, but that is what I thought."

"Good heavens, child, whoever put such an idea into your head?"

Parvati had put a purely rhetorical question but the way Kamini blushed to the roots of her skin, it seemed she had touched some tender spot.

"*They* told me...", she replied, using the respectful third person plural pronoun that a faithful Indian wife must use for her lord and master in lieu of his name.

"*They*? Who?" Parvati, obstinate in her iconoclastic rationalism, insisted on asking.

"Raja Sahib," at last confided Kamini, and then the bonds of reserve having finally broken, the words came gushing out. "He wants me to be modern and smart. But I am so ignorant of the new ways, I make such stupid mistakes. I am unworthy of him and disgrace him by my uncouth manners in public. Oh, I can't tell you how miserable I am. That is why I came to you—to ask how I can learn to be modern. Oh, please help me. Please!"

By gentle coaxing, Parvati got the whole story out of her sister-in-law, a story that was at once amusing and

pathetic. Kamini, nineteen, delicate, unsophisticated, a carefully protected hot-house flower, had been married off to Thakur Harnam Singh, the not-so-young zemindar of a big neighbouring estate of Jalpur who possessed a hereditary title of "Raja", several cars, a palace in Lucknow and a fine bungalow for summer holidays in Mussoorie. He had been educated at an exclusive school for sons of the landed aristocracy and received higher education in London, Paris and Monte Carlo. Since inheriting the estate on the death of his father he had acquired a reputation as the finest connoisseur of cars, wine and women among the zemindars of the province. He had married Kamini after seeing her photograph, only because she was the only eligible daughter of a zemindar of his own rank and caste. He had approved of her pale, rather delicate, beauty and slender figure but he had been disappointed to find her so hopelessly rooted in orthodoxy. She refused to drink even to oblige her husband in gatherings where her abstinence embarrassed him and shocked his friends. She made mistakes with her forks and knives at dinner tables. With difficulty she had agreed to learn to make-up and dress, in accordance with the dictates of fashion. As for ball-room dancing Kamini related her unhappy essay on the slippery dance floor. Once her sari had got caught in her own shoe and on another occasion she had slipped and brought her husband also crashing down and the "accident" had been the subject of gossip in Mussoorie society for weeks on end. The Raja Sahib was very kind and never scolded his wife but it was clear that he was disappointed in her. He had stopped taking her out with him to parties and she was afraid that at this rate she would lose his affection and interest altogether.

"Oh, my sister", she cried out in despair, "Please tell me how to learn these new ways, or my life will be ruined completely."

Parvati listened to Kamini with varying emotion; now amused, now sympathetic, even pitying the timid girl when she recounted her more serious misadventures. As for the Raja, he provoked in her hostile disapproval. She

knew the type and had encountered quite a few specimens during her brief stage career. Their claim to be 'modern' was based on a casual acquaintance with the English language and a closer familiarity with the snobbish etiquette of English "Society". They drank the same old wine of luxury in new, streamlined bottles, and indulged in the feudal debaucheries of their ancestors with a newly acquired cynical disregard for the moral code. They were patrons of the vices of both the East and the West, the sort who danced in ball-rooms as well as kept dancing girls as mistresses. While her feminist ire rose within her against the Raja, Parvati could not help feeling strangely pleased by the situation. Was it not a case of poetic justice being meted out to the orthodox Ramadevi who had disowned a 'modern' daughter-in-law but who had to see her own 'pure' daughter's character being defiled by a husband who was an impious rake? It was an altogether too human a temptation for her to ask, "Have you not told all this to your mother?"

"Yes, I have."

"Then what did *she* advise you?" And even as she asked the question she had a mental picture of the old lady rising in all religious fury to stamp out the infamies being perpetrated by her ill-chosen son-in-law. Would she ask her daughter to separate from her husband? Would she call Harnam Singh and subject him to a third degree inquisition heaping on his head all the curses of the *Rishis* and the *Satis* if he dared to contaminate her innocent daughter with his evil ways? But Kamini's reply stunned Parvati.

"My mother is very unhappy that the man she chose for her daughter has turned out to be so fond of the immoral ways of the West. But she says my clear duty as a Hindu wife is to obey my husband, whatever he commands."

This set Parvati on fire. She perceived the obvious inconsistency in her mother-in-law's orthodox view-point and she was revolted by it. It only revealed the extent to which a person, imbued with such reactionary ideas, would go.

Inspite of the hostility with which the old lady had treated her, Parvati had felt a sneaking respect for the very rigidity of her orthodoxy. She admired strength of convictions, even if the convictions were the wrong ones. But by advising her daughter to fall in with the dictates of her autocratic husband, Ramadevi had forfeited all claims to Parvati's respect. And when she spoke to Kamini, pointing out the absurdity and tyranny of her husband's attitude, Parvati had the satisfaction that she was undermining the influence not only of the husband but of the mother. too !

Ever since she had learnt to think for herself she had been repelled by these pseudo-moderns who conducted their debaucheries under the cloak of modernism. She had no illusions about the real status of women who danced and drank and put on daring dresses not because they liked to do so but only because their husbands commanded them. They were little better than favoured slaves and the chains they wore were not the less real because they were made of gold or platinum and studded with diamonds. It was a shame that women themselves should delude themselves that such servile pampering of men's egos and passions was the freedom that feminists had been demanding and fighting for. And Parvati poured out all these ideas in a torrent of words and watched Kamini, with a satisfaction that was not entirely unselfish, react to this startling denunciation, her pretty pale face flushed pink with the dawn of a terrible disillusionment. It was nearing the midnight hour when she finished and, promising to come again, Kamini rose to go. Parvati knew she had succeeded in disturbing the placid waters of her well-like soul and did not think it politic or polite to press home the point there and then. But the mischievous imp in her did not want to lose the opportunity of hitting back at the mother-in-law.

"I hope, in your own interests, that your mother does not come to know you have been here. She might disown you even as she has veritably disowned your brother."

"But she knows already," Kamini threw back from the door before she passed out into the courtyard, "you

see it was *Mataji* who suggested that I come and see you in this connection."

Parvati was left speechless, wondering how much more she had to learn about human nature in general, and her mother-in-law in particular.

11

THE sights and sounds and smells of monsoon !

The evening had been washed by a smart shower of rain and there was a nip in the night air. Parvati stood by the window, smelt the fragrance of wet earth and the jasmines that grew abundantly in the garden, the thousands of virgin buds glistening like stars in the moonlight. The frogs kept up a noisy racket in the ponds and the night was filled with the sounds of nameless creatures that seem to become alive only during the rainy season. Over the bright round disc of the full moon passed a cavalcade of clouds—white and vapoury like Dacca muslin, bright grey and odd bits of inky black.

Parvati stood by the window, drinking in the peaceful beauty of the scene. But the atmosphere was a trifle too depressing for her, alone as she was, not expecting Srikant for two days more. Within her was the emptiness that comes with the enforced idleness of an active mind and an active body. Not the least annoying feature of her present life was this lack of activity, made more acute and galling by the absence of her husband. She had tried reading the paper to distract her mind. It was full of the latest turn in the war situation—the invasion of Russia by the German armies. Normally, Parvati was not interested in news of war, beyond a general and vague feeling of bitter disgust at the antics of dictators and politicians who had led the world into yet another death dance. She had a free soul's lively hatred for the Nazis and the Fascists but little enthusiasm for the other side, too. But the involvement of

Russia struck her as particularly tragic. For she had heard and read so much about social and economic reconstruction in that country. As a feminist she had been impressed by the equality and freedom accorded to Soviet women in the workers' State and realised that only on those lines could feminism vindicate itself. She knew little about Communism and she had heard quite a lot of unpleasant things about the Soviet Union—trials and purges and the OGPU—but that did not stop her from taking a lively interest in that country. Srikant, who had been to Russia himself, had vividly described the country and the people and the amazing progress made by them since the revolution in 1917, and through him and his love for the Soviet people, Parvati too had felt a bond grow between her and the U.S.S.R. And now Hitler's barbaric hordes were over-running that great land of real hope and glory and promise and Parvati, who knew nothing about its political, diplomatic and international implications, was profoundly disturbed by the grim possibilities of the situation. Ever since the war broke out on that fateful September 3 of 1939, this was the first time she had personally experienced the shock and impact of war.

The drums of war were sounding in Parvati's ears. No, but these were not drums of war that she heard being beaten. The sharp pulsating rhythm of the *dholak* came crashing through the silence of the night. And the body of the dancer instinctively responded to its urgent summons. She felt like dancing a weird war dance to the accompaniment of this crude but vital music. She must find out where it was being played or she would not be able to sleep.

Stealthily slipping out of the shadows that protectively clung to the ancient house, Parvati found her way by the simple expedient of following the sound of the *dholak*. Finally she reached the poorest quarter of the village, the cluster of huts where the low-born sweepers and cobblers lived. In a sort of barn or shed which served as a *chaupal* for the community, a score of them sat in a circle round a cheerful crackling fire that sent scarlet

tongues of flame reaching out towards the ceiling. The flames danced, it seemed, to the tempo and rhythm of the *dholak*-beats and the half-naked ebony bodies squatting round the fire swayed in unison, keeping time with their hand-claps. A young woman, beautiful even if she was dark, was chanting a folk song in a voice that was uncultivated but filled with emotion. Parvati could not fully understand the dialect but she just managed to grasp the sense of it. It was the story of a girl called Lashi—undoubtedly some low-born beauty like the singer herself. A Raja saw her and fell in love with her. He followed her to the bathing *ghat* and tried to seduce Lashi with words of love and temptations of untold wealth. But the faithful Lashi disdainfully spurned the offer by saying. "Eh Raja ! Why should I come with you? My husband is much more handsome than you." The Raja went away, sobered by her retort and the honour of a cobbler girl was saved. As the song ended, the whole gathering raised a chorus of appreciation and there were cries of "Once more. Once more."

Parvati was about to retrace her steps unobserved when someone noticed her and the next moment she was being invited to come and occupy a seat. The young woman who had been singing came up to her and said, "We know you, lady, you are the wife of *Chottey Sarkar*. Won't you please honour us?" The words of polite refusal froze upon Parvati's lips as an old and wizened sweeper came forward and told the young woman, "Shame on you, Saloni. We are low-born cobblers and sweepers. How can we invite a high-caste lady like her to fraternize with us?" And, turning to Parvati, he said in a humble and mellow tone, "Don't mind her, *Sarkar*. You will only bring trouble on yourself if you sit amongst us." This was a challenge to one who prided herself on being a democrat and a bitter opponent of the caste system. Moreover, the days of ostracised loneliness in the house had given her an irrepressible craving for human society and here at least she could be sure her own status would not be questioned because she had danced on the stage. They were untouchables. But

wasn't she some sort of untouchable herself? Accepting the invitation with a smile, she passed into the circle of light made by the blazing fire and, with touching cordiality, was given a place of honour. Only the old man stood aloof watching the scene with eyes full of melancholy wisdom.

Another song was started but Parvati was too much engrossed in observing her hosts to be able to follow the story of this one. Here were the lowliest of the low-caste people of her country, who had been condemned for centuries to lead a life of downright servility, eating castaway food and carrion, abused and insulted and pushed around. And yet they smiled—their teeth flashed in the firelight—, yet they sang and danced and were moved by emotions. What was the secret of this race vitality? How much of intelligence and humanity and the finer instincts of mankind lay buried within these sunburnt bodies, toughened by toil, with the suppleness and elasticity that comes with honest labour? Parvati thought of all the underprivileged millions of her country—the Harijans, the poor craftsmen, the peasants and the workers. From childhood she had been brought up in a nationalist tradition. She knew that the national movement had been a mass upsurge, too, that Mahatma Gandhi and the Congress and the many reformers and humanitarians had done much to improve the lot of the low castes, to make them conscious of their rights. But was that enough? She asked herself, and wondered when the spell of patience would be broken and these millions rise to claim the heritage that was theirs, that had been so long denied to them? As the exploited and the unprivileged had risen in Russia! And she was back where she had started, thinking of the Nazi attack on Russia, wishing Srikant was there to tell her about all the implications of the situation.

The song ended and from the battlefields of Russia, Parvati was jerked back to the earth of Rajnipur. The gathering was now rising to its feet for a group dance. The men formed a big circle and the women a smaller circle within, with the young woman who, had sung the

first song dancing in the centre. It was not much of a dance and the eyes of an expert like Parvati could see its obvious crudity and lack of any particular, well-coordinated dance pattern. Everyone seemed to be doing what one pleased, jerking his or her body in a series of unrehearsed gestures and movements, keeping time to the beat of the *dholak* in one's own way. To the dancer, trained in the classical tradition, it appeared at first as a grotesque and unharmonious jumble of movements, an utter waste of human energy and effort. But after a while she had to admit to herself that there *was* a rhythm in its apparent lack of pattern, a wild, undisciplined but vital rhythm that was so much like the life of these people—vitality without direction, power without organization! And then she saw the faces of the dancers. They were radiant with joy, their white teeth sparkling, their eyes like dancing stars. Their shiny black bodies writhed and wriggled and turned and twisted in an unself-conscious orgy of ecstasy. This was dancing, not in accordance with any technique or tradition, but the spontaneous expression of the deeper urges of nature and what it lacked in grace and symmetry it gained in power and sincerity.

Parvati could never say how exactly it happened. Perhaps the girl who was dancing in the centre came to her and invited her to join them. Perhaps she herself wanted to do it, in any case. To a body attuned to dancing, the spectacle of dance is an inescapable contagion. Whatever the reason, she found herself in the centre of the group dancing, following the movements of the others but also improvising steps and gestures of her own and, in turn being followed by the the others. Gradually the formless mass of dancers arranged itself in a semblance of order round her and the dance itself took shape. What was the theme of the dance she was improvising? What particular dance technique she was using? Parvati scarcely knew. For the first time she was dancing not with her mind but with her body, allowing her limbs free play, guided only by her instincts. But she was trying to express what she was feeling at the moment—

joy and exultation, the feeling of the comradeship of the human family, the sense of elemental power surging through the body of the mass, the collective hope of all these men for a better future, and more than hope—determination to be free and walk the earth, erect and unafraid! As she danced, did she succeed in communicating some of these ideas to this strange dance troupe of hers, these illiterate and ignorant men and women, sweepers and scavengers and cobblers and coolies? She could not say for certain, but she saw that they did their best to follow her movements and immensely enjoyed doing so.

Exhausted by so much strenuous exercise after a long spell of inactivity, Parvati herself brought the dance to a close, otherwise she knew they wanted her to go on. Perspiring, panting, yet their faces shone with a new-found joy, and while the men kept a shy, respectful distance the women crowded round and overwhelmed her with words of gratitude. The girl who had sung and led the dance proved bolder than the rest and disregarding the frowning look of the old sweeper who clearly deprecated such familiarity, invited Parvati to her house. "Please, come some day. My name is Saloni. You can ask anyone in the sweepers' quarter for my house." And each knew she had found a friend.

That night, as she returned to her room, Parvati could not sleep for a long time. Her entire body ached and her feet were sore and blood-stained, for she was unused to walking bare-foot and dancing on the rough ground had produced blisters on her soles. Yet she felt happier and lighter in mind than she had felt on any day since she had arrived in Rajnipur. As at last the fleecy clouds of sleep gathered round her and she abandoned herself to their soft embrace, Parvati smiled a smile of inner satisfaction and self-fulfilment.

■

12

A letter from Srikant. Parvati opened it with a fluttering heart but as she read it her spirit drooped like a wilted flower. He would not be home for another week. Nor had he yet found a suitable job. He had written:

“To try to get a job in our country is like committing a felony. At every step you are confronted by a stone wall which you can scale only by lying, flattery, bribe or wire-pulling. Not your capacity for, and willingness to, work but influence counts. I have been advised to seek the help of my father’s influential friends. But I have decided that if I cannot get a position as plain Doctor Srikant I will not have it as the son of a landlord. Meanwhile I have been round some of the hospitals here and in the neighbouring districts and, believe me, they need the world’s biggest broomstick for their cleaning-up. I offered a municipality my services on a nominal salary to run their hospital but the Committee members seemed to think only a lunatic or a dishonest person could make such an offer. So the job has gone to the second cousin of a councillor who can be depended upon to maintain the vicious *status quo*. Any way, I am not entirely without hope and something might turn up before I return home next week. Don’t be disappointed my sweet, and try to keep yourself busy and cheerful though I know how hard it must be in the present circumstances. Not for a moment do I forget the unpleasant situation I have landed you in and if your love had not sustained me, you cannot imagine how horribly miserable I would have been.”

How very much like Srikant! So tender and considerate, always ready to take the blame upon himself. Parvati

read and re-read the letter and felt protected by the love that poured out of its unostentatious words. With a singing heart she busied herself in tidying up the room, dusting the books and furniture. But by lunch-time she had finished everything and with the oppressive heat of a monsoon afternoon a feeling of dullness settled upon her. Parvati was not one of those who enjoy solitude. She was a very social animal and the previous night's adventure had made keener her appetite for company. If only Kamini would come. But after her first visit the pale girl had not returned and Parvati knew who was responsible. The old woman wanted to scare her away by this ostracisation. By way of contract Parvati thought of the kindly lowcaste folk. She thought of Saloni and her affectionate challenging, invitation to visit her house. Should she go? Why not? She had nothing to lose but her boredom.

Under the cover of night Parvati had been able to make way to the low-caste quarter practically unobserved by anyone. But it was an altogether different matter in the daytime. At every few steps she met someone who eyed her quizzically. She was sufficiently used to such male attention not to feel embarrassed but it annoyed her all the same. And it was only by pretending to disregard the look of curiosity on the faces she encountered that she was able to reach her destination and enquire the way to Saloni's house. The old sweeper woman who pointed it out seemed astonished to see her there but smiled benevolently, no doubt remembering how she had fraternized with them the previous night, and Parvati felt reassured and rehabilitated.

Before she could knock at the door, she heard a big commotion inside. Someone was being beaten and a girl was crying aloud. A man's voice rose in angry denunciation and each vulgar abuse was accompanied by renewed thrashing. "Perhaps Saloni's husband is beating his daughter." She thought and knocked with redoubled vigour. She must save the poor child from this sadistic torture.

"Who is there?", the man's gruff voice called out and

for a moment the beating was stopped, "Go away, come some other time. I am busy."

"Open. Open." Parvati shouted beating the door with her fists.

Heavy footsteps walked up to the door, there was the rattle of the chain being unfastened and the door opened on its creaky hinges. A hefty man with bloodshot eyes stood at the threshold and he held in his hand a piece of rope twisted into a whip.

For a second Parvati was taken aback by this peculiar reception. Then she said, "Is Saloni at home? I want to see her." The man, obviously impressed and startled by the status of the visitor, moved to one side allowing her to enter, then he threw the rope into a corner and went out, sobered and rather cowed down.

It took Parvati some moments to get used to the dark interior. Then slowly, as her eyes picked up the details one by one, she was shocked by what she saw. It was the poorest, most wretched hovel she had ever seen and a year ago she could never have believed anyone could live in such a place. But more than the room, she was shocked to see Saloni who was cowering in a corner like a frightened animal who had just been saved from the knife of the butcher but did not know whether the slaughter had been abandoned or only postponed. There was such terror in her eyes as Parvati had never seen before, and the vivacious young woman who was singing and dancing so merrily only the previous night was moaning.

The girl who had hoped to be a doctor pulled herself out of shocked inertia and applied herself to the urgencies of first aid. And in a quarter of an hour she was able to restore Saloni to a fit enough condition to tell her story.

The girl had been married at an early age to a man much older than herself. And owing to some internal disorders she had been unable to present a child to her husband in the ten years of their married life. This had made him irritable and jealous and he kept on threatening to take another wife. But he was unemployed and

could not afford to bear the expenses of a second marriage. Now he had taken to drinking toddy and when he was drunk he was a demon of violence and would thrash his wife on the slightest provocation.

"What happened today?"

"Nothing, He had gone to the toddy shop as usual and there some of his drunken friends teased him about my dancing last night. That was enough to make him wild and wreak his vengeance on me." The girl, having mastered her sobbing, was now apologetic.

"I am so sorry this should have happened today. I invited you to my house and when you did come what a welcome I gave you! As it is, I hardly expected a great lady like you to visit a poor sweeper woman."

Parvati, however, was thinking of the larger problem of Saloni's whole life. "Tell me, don't you want to leave your husband?"

"Leave my husband?" There was frank astonishment in Saloni's eyes, "No, no, why should I do that?"

"But the way he treats you! And then he threatens to take another wife. How can you be happy with him?"

"No no, please don't judge him by what you saw to-day. He can be very kind too. It is only that he is without a job and that makes him bitter. Then his friends tease him about his having to live on his wife's earnings and about my barrenness and then, if he is drunk, he gets wild and beats and talks of marrying again. But I know he won't really do it because...because, you see, he likes me."

Parvati knew by the downcast eyes of Saloni that when she said "he likes me," she meant "he loves me."

"And you?" She asked, "What about you? Do you also...er... like him?"

Saloni bashfully nodded her head in silent affirmative. And the sophisticated Parvati was left to unravel this complex pattern of love and devotion and drunken

violence born of economic desperation and perverse self-respect. But of one thing she was sure. She could not allow this kind of scene as she had witnessed to be repeated, so long as it was in her power to prevent it.

"Tell that wonderful husband of yours when he is sober," she said, relieving the sternness of the warning with a smile, "that if he beats you again, I will—I will—yes, I will myself come and give him a thrashing in return."

"That will really save me from his violence." The woman certainly had a sense of humour. "You see, he is quite frightened of women. Yes, even of me! That's why he beats me."

And then the paradoxical philosopher laughed so heartily that it was difficult to imagine that half an hour ago she was being mercilessly belaboured by her husband. Parvati could not help joining in the laughter, though her meticulously logical mind did not see the point of the joke.

As she rose to go, Saloni detained her with a pleading look. "But you have not accepted our hospitality. You must take something. I will get some sweets for you from the bazar."

Parvati looked around the poverty-stricken dwelling. Even an anna would be too much of a strain on their finances. She stopped Saloni just as she was about to go out. "Please don't worry. I am really not hungry and I don't like sweets."

Saloni's face fell. "But, of course, I was forgetting... How can you eat from our hand? It was stupid of me even to think of it."

The rationalist and bitter enemy of caste was provoked by this challenge. "Please give me a glass of water. I am thirsty." She said without worrying to answer the implied allegation.

Saloni looked at the dirty pitcher of water in the corner and the greenish, rusty copper bowl that lay near it. She hurriedly cleaned the bowl, tried to rub away its rust

marks, then filled it with water and offered it to her guest with trembling hands.

The devotee of cleanliness and hygiene took the obviously unclean and unhygienic vessel and drank the water in one gulp though she had felt no thirst at all. And in the smile that twinkled in Saloni's eyes was her reward for this recklessness—the death of the demon of caste!

13

PARVATI walked back home in a thoughtful mood, reflecting over the scene she had just witnessed. It was difficult for her to imagine how Saloni continued to live with a husband who habitually got drunk and beat her. Suppose Srikant turned out to be so merciless? Would she tolerate it? Of course, the idea was crazy. Her Sri could never cause her an injury in body or in mind. But viewing the problem purely hypothetically she felt certain what she would do in the circumstances. She would take the first opportunity to obtain a divorce. If Saloni reacted differently and continued to love the man who ill-treated her, it must be due to the centuries old tradition of servility that women of her class have inherited.

And yet she was unable to think too harshly of Saloni's husband. From what she had heard he seemed to have his own troubles which, in the particular psychological atmosphere of his class, had produced these violent reactions in him. He was unemployed and that made him bitter. His wife was barren and his friends teased him, questioning his manhood. That made him still more bitter. He sought to drown his worries in toddy and the habit made him violent when he was drunk, and gloomy and depressed when he was sober. It was a vicious circle and an illiterate sweeper could hardly be expected to reason himself out of it.

To her the situation was the same, however she looked

at it. Saloni and her husband—granted for no fault of either of them—were leading an unsatisfactory married life. If they still thought they loved each other, it was a deception they were practising upon themselves, continuing a relationship that was more legal than emotional, out of deference to the conventions of their class and society. It was clear that a divorce was the only solution in keeping with the self-respect of either party.

Thinking such thoughts she reached home. Walking in the sun had given her a thirst and she went straight to the corner of the verandah where the waterpitcher was kept on three-legged stool. It was empty. The servant had forgotten to fill it up in the morning. Not forgotten, perhaps, but deliberately neglected. She was more than annoyed. She shouted for them, but no servant came. It seemed to be conspiracy. Well, she would show them!

She picked up the pitcher and went straight for the kitchen that was situated like a buffer state between the *zenana* and the outer male quarters. There, she knew, was kept a whole row of water-pitchers. She would leave her own empty pitcher there and bring one from there. Did they think she could not use her own hands?

Like a whirlwind she stormed the kitchen. The fat pot-bellied cook, whose sacred thread was slung across his bare chest and who flaunted his caste marks on the forehead, upset a frying pan full of boiling *ghee*, and scalded both his feet as he got up in a hurry at her approach. She went straight for the row of pitchers looking provocatively cool and red and moist and filled to the brim. But before substituting the dry and empty vessel she had brought for one of them she was tempted to take a draught of the sparkling cool water. Near at hand stood half a dozen water-cups of gleaming brass and she took one of them and dipped it in the pitcher. Then the skies burst.

"Stop!" The Brahmin cook was shouting in a tone of utter disrespect. "You have polluted all the vessels by touching them."

For a moment she did not understand the full import of the remark. "What do you mean?" She exclaimed gulping down the water, "Have you gone mad, *maharaj*?"

By now the man was beside himself with rage. "You outrage the rules of caste by mixing with the untouchables, then you come here in the kitchen and touch our things! Do you want us also to lose our caste and our religion along with you?"

Parvati was scandalised, moved to the core of her being by the affront so cold-bloodedly offered to her. A rational mind and the mellow humanity she had got from her mother had given her a certain amount of humility. But also from her tempestuous, iconoclastic father she had inherited a stubborn pride and a temper that was apt to flare up at any kind of hypocrisy, snobbery or bigoted prejudice. The caste system was her pet aversion and, like her father, she was all the more sensitive about it because of the origin of her mother. Anyone upholding the orthodox notions of caste not only shocked her social conscience but also, by implication, insulted her mother—the one person whom she had loved most in her life. And that was one thing Parvati could never forgive.

"So, you object to my entering the kitchen, do you? Then *you* can leave the kitchen this very minute. Don't forget I am the daughter-in-law of this house and what I say will have to be obeyed."

The cook was one of the favourite servants of Ramadevi, pampered by everyone because of his high caste and his incomparable culinary skill, and he was not used to having his authority flouted in this markedly offensive manner. The threat of resignation was an old trick he played, invariably with success, whenever he wanted his slightest wishes fulfilled. Being a Brahmin and, therefore, of a higher caste than even the zemindar's family, he had always received deferential treatment due to his high birth. Even Ramadevi never spoke to him harshly. Parvati's intrusion into the kitchen, therefore, was an outrage the high-born cook could not tolerate.

"You...you will regret, I tell you," he stammered, his words choked by anger. "You have insulted a Brahmin. The gods will never forgive you." Saying this, he stumped out of the kitchen, leaving the atmosphere tense and electric.

"Now *maharaj* is gone. He won't come back," commented one of the maid-servants. "Who will cook the food?"

"I will," she spoke with determination but the servants cynically smiled, evidently refusing to believe that a college-educated dancer could ever cook. And Parvati, observing the reaction, decided, "I will show them." It was not for nothing that she had learnt how to manage a kitchen from her mother who was herself an expert cook.

From the beginning, however, she saw that the maid-servants were not going to give her any help. They stood at a distance, critically watching everything she did. Well, then she would do all the cooking singlehanded! Any obstacles in her path were only a challenge to her will and she set to work with clenched teeth and grim resolve.

As she worked—peeling potatoes, washing and chopping vegetables, mixing condiments and spices, frying them in *ghee*, boiling the rice and preparing *chapaties* with a wooden roller—her old enthusiasm for kitchencraft returned. The sweet and pungent odours rose from the steaming pots and as she tasted each dish Parvati felt satisfied that she had not forgotten the lessons her mother had given her. She forgot even the unpleasant episode with the cook. And as she saw the servant girls still watching her, their scepticism changed to amazement, she felt rewarded for all her hard work. And then a sudden thought struck her: "If my irate mother-in-law tastes these dishes I have prepared she may yet change her mind about me. At least she will know that a modern girl can cook as well as dance." This might well be the prelude to a more enduring reconciliation. And if that happens, how happy it would make Srikant! The idea

appealed to her so much and seemed so hopeful that she wondered why she had not thought of it before. Perhaps it had been a mistake on her part to keep aloof and now she might win over her mother-in-law by intervening in domestic work.

When the *chapaties* were baked and ready, Parvati went into the adjacent room which served as a pantry and brought out a silver *thali* and the little silver cups for vegetables, curries, curds, pulses and pickles. She arranged the *thali* with meticulous care and then called one of the servants whom she knew to be less hostile to her than the rest.

"Rami, will you please take this *thali* to *Mataji*? Then come back and take another one for Kamini Rani." Rami who was young and rather pleasant-mannered moved to take the *thali* from Parvati but she was sharply ordered back by one of the older women. "Rami, are you mad? Or do you want to get a shoe beating from *Mataji*. Don't you know where this lady has been yesterday and today, with whom she has mixed and eaten and drunk? A religious person like our *Mataji* won't even look at this food."

• "Stop babbling," cried the indignant Parvati, "if you won't take the *thali*, then I will take it myself."

Saying this, she set out herself carrying the heavy tray balanced shoulder high on her palm. This further act of service, she hoped, might still melt the heart of the stern old lady.

Stepping into the courtyard she met Kamini and from the look of painful embarrassment she wore on her face Parvati knew she could not count upon her as an ally. But at least there was no trace of hostility and one could be grateful for that.

"Kamini, sister, I am taking this food to *Mataji*. After that I will bring a *thali* for you, too." And she proceeded to Ramadevi's room.

The old lady as usual, sat on the deer skin in an attitude of devotion, facing the oleograph picture of Rama on

the wall. On hearing footsteps she turned round and saw her daughter-in-law standing with a *thali* in her hands. Her expression as she turned from the wall to face Parvati was one of spiritual preoccupation. But within the twinkling of an eye, it changed to one of unbelievable hardness, the eyes shone with hostility and the thin, sensitive lips twitched with contempt.

For a few moments the two eyed each other and under the cold, imperious scrutiny of the older woman Parvati, still holding aloft the heavy *thali* felt self-conscious, ridiculous and irritated. She tried to subject her adversary to her own critical stare but she was no match to the eyes that had in them all the fire of unthinking fanaticism and the self-assurance of feudal aristocracy. On previous occasions Parvati had had the protection of Srikant's presence. Today she was alone and felt weak and utterly helpless.

Ramadevi called out, "Someone there?" and when one of the servant girls came in response to the summons, she disdainfully turned away from Parvati and addressed the servant, "Please tell—er—this woman that we in this household do not eat from the hands of those who mix with carrion-eaters and untouchables. She can go to the quarters where she belongs and eat the food she has cooked." And, she added with deliberate emphasis, "tell the *maharaj* I am sorry for what happened this afternoon. Let him return to the kitchen and get every thing cleansed and purified."

Parvati was struck dumb with the sting of this pointed humiliation. If her mother-in-law had abused her, struck her, spat on her, she would not have been so hurt as she was by this studied contempt and the indirect manner in which she had been dismissed as if she was too low even to be addressed directly. The blood mounted to her cheeks in a flood of furious anger and tears of impotent rage welled up in her eyes. No, no, she must not betray her weakness in the presence of this cruel old woman and this sneering servant girl. She must run away, far, far from here, from this cant and hypocrisy and blind unreason. She had not intended it but the

heavy *thali* slipped from her tired, numbed hand and clattered over the floor with a fearful noise. For a moment she gazed at the wreck on the ground and then she ran out of the room. Parvati fled and did not pause for breath till she had reached her room and flung herself on her bed. The white, clean pillow felt cool against her fevered cheeks and she surrendered herself to the ecstasy of a flood of tears.

14

WHEN Srikant returned next week he was shocked to see his wife looking deathly pale with black circles round her eyes. Parvati, however, was too proud to confess to him that she had not slept for three nights and had been shedding tears of impotent rage most of the time. She said something about mosquitoes and malaria and changed the topic. He had nothing much to report beyond what he had written in his letter. There were no immediate prospects of a job, and as a net result, Parvati knew she was condemned to live there in that horrible prison for an indefinite length of time, perhaps for ever. The joy of reunion almost died with the disappearance of the chances of freedom. In spite of herself a note of bitterness crept into her voice.

"Was it necessary for you to be so finicky about going to your father's friends for a recommendation? It doesn't strike me as such a terrible sacrifice of principle."

"What do you mean?" He was frankly puzzled by her question. "Could I have resorted to all the cheap and vulgar tricks of the trade to get a job?"

She knew he was right but she so much wanted to get away that she resented anything that stood in the way of her escape. "No one is asking you to be cheap and vulgar. If you had just met some of the influential people, they might themselves have offered to help you." This was quite a reasonable argument but she spoilt it by

going off at a tangent. "But the real thing is that you are not keen on getting a job. You want me to live here in this miserable hole. You want to kill me !" From beneath the layers of rationalism, the ancient heritage of the stay-at-home woman—hysteria—was asserting itself. Parvati burst into tears, the last argument of women and the despair of their men !

Srikant was unable to discover the reason for this temper and Paravati, unreasonable in the expression of her reasonable grievance, refused to enlighten him. She wanted him to sympathise with her but she forgot that he was completely ignorant of the way she had been humiliated in his absence. Thus does passion lay traps for the enslavement of reason.

Tired after a difficult journey, keenly feeling the disappointment at his continued unemployment, Srikant had come home expecting to find solace in the love and understanding of his wife. But what struck him, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, as a wholly unreasonable attitude on her part completed his frustration and bitterness. Too polite and habitually restrained, he had no desire to prolong a quarrel and, wishing to avoid any discussion till Parvati's unaccountable temper had cooled down, he left his rooms and went inside to see his mother.

There too he found an atmosphere tense and full of forebodings. Ramadevi, who had been informed of her son's arrival, lay prostrate on her bed, her tear-stained and wrinkled face presenting a pathetic spectacle. While Parvati's education and training prompted her to hide, rather than parade, her personal anguish, no such considerations weighed with the old lady who from her childhood had been brought up in an atmosphere of undisciplined emotionalism and hysteria. Tears, sighs, an ostentatious pose of silent martyrdom—these were the approved weapons of a woman in a feudal household to be used against her father, her brother, her husband—and her son ! There was no question of hypocrisy or blackmail about it. Poses and attitudes, conditioned by long and general usage, acquire the appearance and ring

of sincerity. Who can say that the mother who bursts into tears to coerce her son into a distasteful marriage is any more hypocritical than the spoilt child who cries when he wants anything? In Ramadevi's case, to her personal dislike of a modern daughter-in-law was added the extra-personal issue of her religion which had been defiled and whose regular observance had been interfered with by Parvati's sacrilegious activities. Now she could comfort herself by the thought that by her hostile attitude to her daughter-in-law she was not merely obeying the dictates of her ego but holding aloft the banner of her faith.

She greeted her son with a long and mournful sigh. When he enquired after her health she said, "I am all right, son," in a tone intended to belie the reassuring statement. And when he insisted she burst into tears.'

"Son, please kill me with your own hands instead of leaving me to be thus humiliated in my own house," she managed to say between the sobs, "I don't want to live any longer. What is the use of my existence if I cannot preserve the sanctity of my faith?"

Srikant was a healthy agnostic, but he respected his mother's attachment to religion and regarded it as a harmless eccentricity to which she was entitled by virtue of her age and upbringing. Generally it took the form of the feeding of Brahmins and donations to cow-protection societies, and he saw no particular evil in either. He was quite surprised and angry to hear, therefore, that someone was interfering with the old lady's religion and asked her the name of the transgressor.

"It is that woman whom you call your wife," and before he had recovered from the impact of the sudden revelation, a flood of words was let loose on him. "I have not yet opened my mouth against her though you know I did not approve of your marriage. I still do not know how she managed to ensnare you. Perhaps she knows some form of magic. I don't want to go into that for the moment. But, look what she has done to me. First she goes off at dead of night, alone and unattended,

to roam through the village. Then she is seen dancing with the untouchables—the pariahs whose very shadow is enough to pollute a decent person. She is not content with the much intimacy and next day must go—in broad daylight, too—to visit the house of a sweeper woman and there flout the rules of caste by eating and drinking with her. Anyway, that is her own business. Water finds its own level, after all ! But then straight from this sweeper woman's house she has the colossal effrontery to come into my house, pollute my kitchen, abuse and turn out the *maharaj* and then, to humiliate me, bring a trayful of the polluted food prepared by her and fling it down in my face."

Essentially, the story as related by Ramadevi was true though she had embellished it here and there for the sake of more pointed effect. It was not true, for instance that Parvati had abused the *maharaj*, nor had she flung down the tray of food. But with all that, Srikant was only slightly annoyed with his wife's tactlessness and a little surprised how she came to be dancing with the Harijans. But even his mother's passionate denunciation could not convince him that Parvati had been guilty of any heinous crime. With characteristic objectivity, he regarded the situation as an unfortunate clash of two contrary wills and much as he loved his mother he knew that reason was on the side of his wife. Indeed, he was quite provoked by Ramadevi's insinuations about Parvati's low birth and lack of character and he proceeded to make it clear—in as polite words as he could contrive—that he would not tolerate any insulting remarks about his wife, even from his mother !

"*Mataji*, please be reasonable," he pleaded, "We of this generation can no longer subscribe to your religious creed. If I do not say anything it is because I love and respect you and do not want to hurt you by unnecessary arguments. But Parvati was brought up in a different atmosphere. You must try to understand her and overcome your prejudices against her and I am sure you will find what an admirable daughter-in-law you have got. Of course, it was wrong of her to meddle with your cooking

arrangements. I will tell her that and it won't occur again. But, please consider what I have said and let us have a little more harmony in the house than there has been so far."

Prejudice, however is as deaf as passion is blind and all Srikant's pleadings were lost on his mother. She sat there, inert and mute, hearing nothing, seeing nothing, understanding nothing. All her will was concentrated upon melting the heart of this errant boy of hers and alienating it from the woman who, in her eyes, was devil incarnate. Srikant waited for a while for her to speak, then finding it useless to pursue the conversation any further, he went out.

Parvati, meanwhile, had overcome her hysterical mood and affected a mask of casual indifference which, however, could not hide the tell-tale pallor of her cheeks nor the cheerless huskiness of her voice. Srikant, out of his love, could feel the way she was feeling. He wanted to comfort her, speak words of endearment, take her in his arms, tenderly kiss her swollen eye-lids, do something to relieve the burden of unnecessary anguish she was carrying. But she had built a protective wall of injured reserve round her and he felt powerless to break through it. He tried to talk her out of it but, after some desultory conversation, gave up the attempt.

They ate their dinner in silence, Parvati hardly nibbling at a few morsels. But after the servants had cleared the table, she broke the spell.

"Did you see your mother?"

"Yes."

"I suppose she has reported to you all the evil deeds I perpetrated during your absence!"

"Well, she does seem upset over what she regards as your flagrant violations of caste rules."

"And what about you? Are you also upset by them?"

"Not exactly. You know my views about these things. I believe in caste no more than you do." And then he blundered. Instead of asking her what had

actually happened, he went on. "But I do think you could have been a little more tactful and avoided a too public demonstration of your unorthodox attitude. You know how touchy the old lady is about anything even remotely related to religion. And caste is the very kernel of her faith. Why go out of your way to injure her at her tenderest spot?" And as he watched Parvati knitting her eye-brows in an angry gesture, he knew he had done exactly what he had wanted to avoid at all cost. But it was too late to retrace that step. His next remark, intended to introduce a lighter, friendlier tone in the conversation only worsened the situation. "And, anyway, how on earth did you happen to be dancing with the untouchables?"

Srikant, democrat and rationalist, himself had not the slightest objection to his wife fraternising with the untouchables. But the circumstances did appear odd to him and it was out of curiosity rather than with a desire to be sarcastic at her expense that he had put the question. Yet—and thus does one misunderstanding lead to another and bigger one!—Parvati took it in a completely different light and the reply she gave bristled with shafts of bitter irony.

"Well, I will tell you. Did you and your mother think for a moment what it feels like to be shut up for two whole weeks in a couple of rooms with no one to talk to, no human company, looking out at the same unchanging trees and fields through the window, to hear the same monotonous patter of the rain and the croaking of the frogs, hour after hour, day after day. Your mother's religion never taught her enough charity to think of me in these lonely rooms, to come to me or send for me. Well, when I heard the sound of the *dholak* I went out to see the sweepers dance. At least they proved to be human. They treated me as one of them. They asked me to dance with them. I danced. And why not? It is my profession. Isn't it? You married me, knowing that I was a dancer."

Srikant wanted to tell her that he understood, that he was sorry if he had involuntarily hurt her, but he got

no chance to speak. And Parvati knew that nothing that had happened was his fault but she had to let out the repressed venom in her heart and he whom she loved had to be the victim.

"As for defiling your mother's sacred kitchen I must say I was not brought up in such an atmosphere of hocus-pocus. I sacked the cook because he insulted me and told me I had polluted the kitchen—surely I was not going to stand such humiliation! And if it is a crime or a sin for a daughter-in-law to prepare food for her mother-in-law after sweating in the kitchen for three hours and carry it herself in a tray, then surely I am guilty." She almost shrieked, carried away by her own rising anger.

"Of course, you are not guilty, darling." That is what Srikant would have said if Parvati had stated her case in a more reasonable tone of voice. But in his turn, he was himself provoked not so much by the bitterness of her denunciation as by the implied charge against his rationalism. How could she think for a moment that he would in any way support such orthodoxy and unreason? If she could not credit him with that much rationalism and humanity, then she grievously misjudged him, did him terrible injustice. In view of his own social attitudes which she knew very well, all this hysteria and shouting seemed to him quite unnecessary and silly. It only demonstrated the emotional unbalance of these women who remained women, however enlightened and rational they might think themselves to be. In his half logical, half prejudiced appraisal of the situation, however, he took no account of a sensitive women's feelings, the hurt that had been caused to her self-respect, the nervous strain of lonely and friendless days, the constant thought, gnawing at her heart, that she was unwanted and despised in her husband's family. As his reasoning slipped into unreasonable grooves, he got really annoyed with her. Why should she have gone to dance with the untouchables, anyway? Was that the only way to be human and express one's sympathy with the under-dogs? What did she gain by it—this senseless exhibitionism!—except to

provoke his mother's hostility ? As his wife, she ought to have been more careful to avoid doing anything to precipitate a domestic crisis. Of course, judged rationally, his mother was wrong. But after all she was sixty years old, ill and infirm. One could lose nothing by being a little tactful and circumspect and avoiding a direct clash with her. It was very foolish of Parvati, he concluded, to have acted in this reckless manner. It was more than foolish. She had been inconsiderate to him !

He simply said, "I am sorry for what has happened but I am afraid we have to live here in this house till I get a job and so let's not have any more quarrels and scenes."

"Oh, I see, His Majesty's orders ! And may I know why you cannot go and live in a town and start practice there ? After all, your estate has sustained you in England for five years, why can't you get money for five or six months more while your practice gets established ?"

"You really want to know the reason. It is because we are heavily in debt. My mother had to borrow on a large scale to keep me going in England. The entire estate, I find, is mortgaged."

To Parvati this news came as a diversion of her bitterness and she felt softened not only towards Srikant, but even towards Ramadevi, who was revealed in new light, as a devoted mother. But now it was his turn to press home his advantage in an unreasonable manner.

"So, you see, that's the situation. Now I suppose you must feel sorry you married a pauper while you expected to be the wife of a rich landlord." Parvati who loved her husband so much that she would have cheerfully starved with him, squirmed under the sting of this remark which all but suggested that she was a gold-digger, and while tears of enraged fury filled her eyes she thought, "How can a man who has such low opinion of me ever love me ?" And when she saw him getting up and taking a pillow and rug into the sitting room to sleep on the sofa, she made no protest and sat, staring into the dark and pain-filled future.

The two hearts still ached for each other, as both Srikant and Parvati tried in vain to sleep. The door connecting the two rooms stood wide open and inviting, but pride barred the way. In that hour of the eclipse of reason, they hated each other with the fury of love's first great hate, but both knew that they hated because they still loved each other.

15

WHAT is love ? What is hate ? Is there a sharp line of demarcation between the two ? Are they not two side of the same picture ? Parvati pondered these eternal imponderables during the next few days as their relations assumed a strained normalcy. They were both too proud to let the situation be revealed to others and in the presence of servants kept up an appearance as if nothing had happened to disrupt their marital bliss. But when they were alone a curtain of uneasy self-consciousness hung between them, their conversation being restricted almost to formal monosyllables.

"Shall I send for dinner ?"

"All right."

"Have you read the paper ?"

"No. Not yet."

"It is bad the way the Russian war is proceeding. Hitler seems headed for Moscow."

"Yes, it is a pity."

Srikant was busy most of the day in his mother's apartments poring over the money-lender's accounts. It appeared that Raniadevi had borrowed money lavishly and at exorbitant compound-interest rates so that the original amount of thirty thousand rupees, borrowed over a period of seven or eight years, had reached the astronomical figure of nearly a lakh. Rameshwar Dayal,

having learnt that Srikant had not secured a big Government job as expected, and also disturbed by recent anti-usury legislation, was now cunningly insistent on a prompt payment. On the other hand the recent pro-peasant laws passed by the Congress ministry before it resigned on the war issue had hit the zemindars hard and reduced the value of landed property considerably and Srikant found himself in the paradoxical position of his personal interests being injured by a law of which, as a socialist, he heartily approved.

"The accursed Congress ministry has come and gone," the money-lender remarked, giving vent to the bitterness he felt against the Congress for legislating against his tribe, too. "But it has left both of us, you and me, in a sad plight. Do you think I would have insisted on immediate settlement if we were still in the good old days? Such transactions between zemindars and *sahukars* have been the normal routine for centuries. Your grand father borrowed fifty thousands from my grandfather for your aunt's marriages but it was all paid back. Those days are, alas, gone now. All the new laws are cutting our throats. The peasants are beginning to think they own the earth. I am afraid of approaching even the humblest peasant for my dues these days as he might murder me one night. Believe me, *Ohhotey Sarkar*, these Congressmen and Socialists are conspiring to murder all of us *sahukars*. Several have already been killed in Punjab. What terrible times are coming! *Hari Ram! Hari Ram!*"

Srikant listened with bored indifference. He did not care if all the *sahukars* were murdered. He knew most of them deserved to be hanged and quartered, the way they squeezed the blood out of the poor illiterate peasants who were forced by economic necessity to borrow money and, once caught, could never escape from the money-lender's clutches. The Congress ministers, he knew, had done the very least in passing some laws for the partial relief of the peasantry. Personally he did not mind if landlordism was abolished at one stroke. But for the moment he was concerned with trying to save what little

of his property he could from the avaricious claws of Rameshwar Dayal.

Parvati saw the signs of mental strain appear on Srikant's face. The news of the estate being in debt and in danger of passing over to the hands of the *sahukar* was already on everyone's lips. The peasants were genuinely sorry to hear it, because they knew he would prove far worse in his dealings with them than the zemindar's family which did, in some ways, maintain a paternal and benevolent relationship with them.

The reports of the impending collapse seemed to have travelled beyond the immediate neighbourhood and Kamini's husband sent for her, fearing that the costly jewellery he had given her might get unnecessarily involved in any attachment that the *sahukar* might bring. Some of the servants, less attached to the family than the others, started leaving on various pretexts. "Rats deserting a sinking ship !" contemptuously remarked Ramadevi. But the old lady, proud and unbending in the hour of crisis, had not yet acknowledged defeat. She called Srikant and, after hearing from him that they would find it difficult even to save the house after settling the money-lender's account, she spoke out her mind.

"Son, come here, sit near me." And Srikant knew some solemn proposition was about to be made. "We can still save the house and at least part of the property. You know how anxious Thakur Harnam Singh was to give his daughter in marriage to you. Well, some one from his household has been to see me and it appears the Thakur Sahib is still prepared to consider the proposal. We may still get twenty or twentyfive thousands in dowry. That much we could straightaway pay the *sahukar* and as for the rest when he finds us connected with such an important estate he may well be persuaded to wait for a while. Or at most we might part with a few unimportant bits while retaining the major portion of the estate."

Srikant tried not to let his mother know how very shocked he was by her proposal. Yet, she could not

have failed to detect the note of bitter irony in his voice as he replied, 'But, *Mataji*, you forget I am already married !'

"Oh, that one !" And the old lady put all the contempt she could muster into that one little pronoun. "That is not really a proper marriage, you know—at least not according to our religion. * She can stay if she likes. After all several of your uncles kept mistresses."

This was more than he could bear. "Mother, I shall not have my wife insulted—no, not even by you ! I have given her my name and her honour is my honour." And with an abruptness that was unusual in his behaviour towards his mother he left the room, leaving the old woman more than ever convinced that the low-born dancer had bewitched her son.

Back in his rooms, he found Parvati in a less dreary mood than usual. Indeed he found a pale smile flickering on her face after many weeks. He felt relieved and hoped this was a sign of the emotional weather clearing up even as the monsoon clouds had now begun to roll away. She was reading a letter and there was something in it that had caused the change. Srikant's heart filled with gratitude for this unknown scribe. By the time she finished reading the letter, Parvati was chuckling with delight and to his ears it was the sweetest music he had ever heard.

"It is from Roopmati—you remember her, don't you ?"

He recalled the good-natured, jovial and rather fleshy dancer and her broad humour, always verging on the border-line of vulgarity. Parvati passed on the letter to him and as he deciphered the almost illegible scrawl he too could not help being amused at the way she had described her experiences of the dance tour—drawing a comically pathetic picture of Nataraj Ratan and his silly infatuation with a young chorus girl, describing in vivid and uproarious detail all the various people who had tried to make love to her particularly one fat merchant who had followed her from town to town till, on

"information" supplied by her, the Police apprehended him on suspicion of being a hoarder of grain—which he actually turned out to be ! At the end of the letter there was a post-script :

' Parvati, my dear, aren't you tired of being an aristocrat's wife and living on the fat of the land ? For if you are, there will always be a place for you—on the top, too—in this show. Natraj, the old bounder, will simply die of joy if he sees you coming back. We are now doing the U. P. cities—Lucknow and Allahabad and Benares—and then passing on to Patna, ending the tour with a long season in Calcutta. Thus we are not far from you. So, what about it, darling ?'

Srikant took the postscript to be worded in the same humorous spirit that ran through the whole letter but as he returned the letter he saw a far-away look on Parvati's face that disturbed him. She was still smiling but in that smile was a gleam of reminiscence that boded no good.

"Sri," Parvati remarked with old familiarity. "let's get out of here. This place is only getting on our nerves and we will never be happy here."

"Where do you want us to go ? I have already told you that with the estate waiting to be auctioned we cannot afford to go and live in the city."

"But I can get a job and we can live on that so long as you set up a practice. Then you need not search for a Government job; you can realize your dream of serving the people by working among them."

Srikant's mind had not yet cleared the hurdle of her first statement. "You can get a job ! Where ?" And then suddenly the meaning of that gleam of reminiscence in her eyes, her joy at receiving Roopmati's letter, dawned upon him. "You mean..."

"Yes," she interrupted him, "I can get a job as a dancer in the old troupe. I was getting five hundred per month when I left them. I can easily get that much again and we can both live quite comfortably on that."

"You mean," he now completed what he had wanted to say, "You mean *I* should live on *your* earnings?"

The eyes of the militant feminist flashed defiance. "And why not? Is it any more humiliating for a man to live on his wife's earnings than it is for a woman to live on her husband's?"

"But, Parvati, it is impossible, can't you see?" The masculine ego, inherited from a thousand years of male superiority raised its head from under the outer garments of rationalism. "I will be disgraced before the whole world. It is not that I am opposed to a woman having a career so long as the husband bears the main responsibility of supporting the family, but for him to depend entirely on his wife's earnings—why, it is unthinkable, it is parasitism of the worst type. It is unmanly."

The friendly light that she had induced in her eyes now died out. Once again it was declaration of war and once again no quarter was to be given to the enemy.

"So, it is parasitical and unmanly to live on the earnings of one's wife! But what about living on the sweat and blood of the poor peasants? That, I guess, is not parasitism. It is the birth-right of the aristocracy!"

It was a mean attack on Srikant's most vulnerable spot and Parvati knew it. Yet, she wanted to spare no possible means of inducing him, arguing with him, if necessary even shaming him into agreeing to go with her. She knew that the shadow of his mother would ever continue to fall between them and the only way of securing his love was to take him away from her. And her love was as unscrupulous as it was unbounded!

Stunned for a moment by the cruel logic of her remark, he took refuge in a martyr-like pose of humility that is only the inverted form of arrogant pride.

"It is no use rubbing that in, Parvati. I know feudal parasitism is in my blood. I can't help it. You can humiliate me as much as you like on that score. I suppose I deserve it."

"You know very well I don't want to humiliate you."

"Then what do you want me to do?"

"Come with me and let me resume my dancing career while you start practice in some big city."

"Well, I am afraid that is not possible. Don't forget that apart from anything else, I cannot go because of my mother. I ought to look after her in her old age. And you know that even if I agree to do so, she will never accept such a position."

"Then I am afraid I am going away alone."

"You can do as you wish. I cannot stop you."

Paradoxical as her woman's nature was, Parvati was hurt by his not opposing her resolve to go away. If he had said, "No, I cannot let you go," even if he had held her back by force, she would have preferred that to this cold acquiescence. It only showed that he did not love her, had no need of her. Little did she know that just as she was asserting women's equality of status, he was trying to concede it to her by not opposing her and was as unhappy about it as she was. But that is the unfortunate contradiction in every modern woman who tries to reconcile an emancipated head with an enslaved heart. She demands to be free from masculine tyranny, to be the equal of man. But when this equality is conceded to her in practice, she suspects her man's rationalism for indifference. That is what Paravati did now, but her incorrigible pride saved her from betraying her weakness and, instead, she assumed a cynical hardness that hurt her as much as it hurt him.

"Then I will be leaving by the evening's train."

Srikant was silent for a moment. Then he said "All right. I will arrange for the carriage to take you to the station." How she wished he would not speak in that cold-blooded, matter-of-fact tone! But, she did not know how hard he had to try to achieve it.

Deceived by his pretended indifference, a horrible thought that had been hiding at the back of her mind elbowed its way out. Divorce! What was the use of continuing a relationship that had lost the only basis for

it—love and understanding ? They no longer seemed to love each other, they no longer seemed to understand each other. No use in blaming him. Perhaps it was her own mistake in accepting his proposal on the strength of an insufficient knowledge of his character and of the atmosphere of his home ! Whatever the reason, obviously it had been a mistake and ought to be rectified at the earliest possible opportunity.

“Srikant, it is obvious you no longer love me and you certainly don’t need me. I have no wish to discuss who is at fault—I or you or your mother or both of you or all of us. What matters is that we have failed to be happy together. In these circumstances, would it not be better for us to take steps to end this relationship without any bitterness ? Neither of us, I am sure, has any primitive sentimental objections to the dissolution of a marriage that has already been reduced to a mockery of that sacred and beautiful relationship.”

If Srikant was surprised or hurt by this proposal he did not show it. Again in his maddeningly calm voice he said, “I will leave that to you to decide. But take a few weeks to think it over.” That’s all and the soul-shattering affair was decided. To Srikant’s objective mind, it seemed like a grim but impersonal tragedy. He saw—alas, too clearly,—the conflicts and contradictions involved. The uncompromising orthodoxy of his mother. Parvati’s equally uncompromising unorthodoxy, regardless of its effect on others less rational, her rabid intolerance of other’s religious convictions, her refusal to make any concessions to the weaknesses of those who were not mentally strong enough to withstand the impact of modern ideas. And, ground between them as between two mill-stones, he saw himself with his loyalties divided between wife and mother, between rationalism and compassion, between complete revolt and tactful compromise. The crisis came with the inevitability of elemental fury and Srikant accepted it with the stoical calm which he might have displayed in the midst of a typhoon or an earthquake. His dispassionate and undemonstrative nature made him suffer more than others

in such an emotional catastrophe. For his self-control denied him the outlet of violent reaction like his mother's or Parvati's. He was too proud to indulge in self-pity, too intelligent not to see the unpleasant reality, too fair-minded to lay the blame entirely on others. More clearly perhaps than Parvati herself he saw the justice of her case. And yet he could not tear himself away from his mother, unreasonable as she was. Perhaps it was his weakness. But then he did not live by his mind alone. Instincts, their roots reaching down into the dim past of childhood, perhaps beyond that into the life in the womb before birth, held him in their grip.

Parvati, however, knew nothing of this. The communications between their inner-selves had broken down entirely, and even as she bade him good-bye, requiring all her obstinate pride to keep back the tears, she saw him only as an inhumanly self-possessed, cruelly unemotional man. She hated him. She loved him. She hated him because she loved him !

The train started. The white-clad figure of Srikant receded along with the platform, the village huts, the mango groves, the fields, all spun away in the distance. And with grim satisfaction she saw the fortress-like towers and bastions of the zemindar's house gobbled up by the horizon. The days she had spent in Rajnipur flashed themselves on the screen of her memory. The first memorable contact with nature in all her beauty. The horrible discovery of the vileness of man's exploitation of man. Portraits. The hard, cruel, yet fascinating look of the aristocratic Ramadevi. The mean, servile and evil-tongued servants, drunk deep at the cesspools of feudalism. The ebony-bodied sweepers and scavengers, inheritors of thousands of years of misery and slavery, seeking the freedom of their souls through song and dance. And, emerging from this crowd, the sweet and innocent face of Saloni, now smiling triumphantly at the end of her song, now cowering with terror in the corner of her home. Saloni at one moment full of resentment against her husband and at the next protesting that they loved each other. Beautiful, paradoxical, pitiful. Thank

heavens, she, Parvati, was not like that. She had the courage of her convictions to tear herself from a husband with whom she could not be happy.

And yet—the aching, intoxicating memories of the man she loved, the mind she loved, the body she loved ! That smile on Srikant's lips. Those wrinkles of worry on his noble brow. His diamond-like intelligence. His humanity and his passion for all the just causes of the world. His unfailing kindness and considerate politeness. His infectious sense of humour. The way he laughed. Those eyes filled with tender love and infinite mercy. The gleam of passion in their limpid depths. The ardour of his kisses. The comforting warmth, the clean smell, of his god like body...

She tried to push away the image of the man she had just left, left for ever. But it persisted. She tried to think of him as one who had failed her. She recalled the coldness with which he had treated her decision to leave him, his obstinate attachment to his unreasonable mother, his irrational conventional objection to share his wife's earnings. And yet the image remained. It smiled at her tantalizingly. It made her smile in spite of herself. It annoyed and infuriated and provoked her. And the persistent tattoo of her heart-beats found a sharp echo in the clatter of the train. I love him. I hate him. I love him. I hate him.

16

ROOPMATI was happy, extremely happy, everything seemed to be going fine. She had acquired a brand new lover. Parvati was back in the old troupe and the two friends were re-united. After a round of the crumbling old cities of U. P. and Bihar, they were now in Calcutta, the gay metropolis on the Hooghly, buzzing with life and activity in preparation for the Christmas 'season' that would soon begin. There was an exciting

edge to the cold breeze that blew from the river, across the *maidan*, into the fine hotel where Nataraj Ratan had put up his principal artistes. Roopmati hummed an old song, not very musically perhaps but with her usual gusto.

Without the formality of knocking at the door, she entered Parvati's room and surprised her in the act of dressing.

"Parvati, my darling, you ought to be grateful to me that I chose a lawyer as my latest boy-friend."

"Oh, hello, Roop, did you get the information at last?"

"You bet I got it. From A to Z. In fact it is quite simple. All you have to do is to tell the court, and produce evidences in its support, that your husband was in the habit of tying you naked to a pillar and whipping you, slapping you in the face till you were black and blue and yellow and green, trying to strangle you with the pillow, brandishing a sword—which, of course, ought to be handy in a zemindar's castle—with the threat to disembowel you or, perhaps, only producing a sharp-edged knife to chop off your nose. Not that you have much of a nose, anyway."

Parvati burst out laughing. "But, Roop, you idiot, you know very well that Sri is not that sort of man. He won't hurt a fly, much less his wife. I can't sue him for divorce on grounds of cruelty."

"Then, perhaps, you can charge him with adultery. I am sure he must be implicated with one of the servant girls. Such things are not unusual in a zemindar's household." This with a mock serious face which broke into a chuckle when Parvati threatened to hit her with a shoe. "Or, perhaps, you would like to save his honour by supplying a co-respondent yourself. You know it can be easily arranged. There are dozens of people I know who would be only too pleased to offer their services."

"Roop, now be serious, you know I don't want such a scandal. Are there no other reasonable grounds?"

"Oh, yes. Plenty. For instance, you could allege that he is insane or that he is suffering from an incurably infectious disease. Or, finally, that he is not worthy of being called a man and the marriage was not consummated."

"Don't be absurd, Roop. You know I won't go to court to make such false and infamous allegations. I want to get a divorce, not to disgrace Sri and myself before the whole world."

"Then, my dear little Parvati," and Roopmati's eyes danced with joy, "I have great pleasure in informing you that on any other grounds you have no chance whatever of obtaining a divorce. You escaped a religious ceremony and had a civil marriage thinking the law was more rational than the *shastras*. Well, it isn't and you are about as free as an eternally married Hindu wife."

Roopmati's irreverent humour helped to relieve the seriousness of the situation and in spite of the weeks of anxiety she had passed pondering this question of divorce, Parvati could not help being amused by her friend's constant banter. Roop had a flair for life, like an unextinguishable pure flame, that illuminated the lives of all around her. Living was to her the end of all life and hedonism was her only philosophy. But in this situation she put on a certain conscious effort, too to distract Parvati's worried mind, in particular to keep it away from the problem of divorce. For, strangely enough, the ex-courtesan who made no secret of her numerous "affairs", believed in, among other superstitions, the sanctity of marriage. It was a case of the conscious sinner paying a homage to piety and sainthood. In any case, she had seen Srikant and liked him and was certain that the present misunderstanding between him and parvati would pass and the two ought to return to each other. "I am too old to get married and settle down," she would observe philosophically, "but I am certainly not going to let you wreck the happiness you have found," adding with a merry wink, "And, you wretch, if you let go of Srikant, I warn you I might change my mind about marriage and try to hook him myself."

Parvati herself was something of a hedonist, at least she had an almost religious fascination for life in all its different colours, for vigorous mental and physical activity. Even with a broken heart, she could enjoy dancing, and though she had given up the habit of looking at the audience as she danced—somehow it brought up too painful memories of Srikant and the circumstances in which she had first met him—the sound of applause was like wine to her soul. It inspired her and invigorated her, restored her self-confidence and faith in herself and her art. It was the nearest approach to a substitute for love. And yet she felt it was not enough !

That night the show was a great success. The hall was packed and for the first time the expensive front rows were all taken up. Calcutta was beginning to fill up with the early arrivals for the festive season. The Viceroy would be there for Christmas, so the Princes, big and small, had already come, though it was only the seventh of December. Along with them had come the usual crowd of pleasure-seekers—*talugdars* and zemindars, the *nouveaux riche* capitalists getting fatter on fat contracts, industrial magnates, sons of the landed aristocracy of U. P. and Punjab with their sisters and their wives. It was a mass pilgrimage in search of sensuous excitement—and one of the recognized shrines was the theatre at which Nataraj Ratan's troupe of dancers was appearing.

When the curtain came down on the *grand finale*, after half a dozen tempestuous encores, Parvati entered her dressing room and found her maid in considerable excitement.

"*Bai*, we are honoured. The *Rani Sahiba* of Jalpur wants to see you."

Jalpur ? Where had she heard of the Rani of Jalpur ? For the moment she could not recollect either the place or the person, but she told the maid, "Send the *Rani Sahiba* in." Next moment she was pleasantly surprised to find Kamini walking in. She was dressed in the most gorgeous sari Parvati had ever set eyes on and she did not look as

pale or thin as she had done six months before. In fact she had filled in at the proper places and one could have called her plump. There was about her an air of newly-acquired self-confidence and when she talked she was no longer diffident and shy.

"*Bhabhi*!" She exclaimed enthusiastically as she saw Parvati, who was taken aback at being addressed as sister-in-law, "Your dancing was superb. It was divine. I have never seen anything like it."

It was difficult to check this flood of *naïve* praises but Parvati somehow managed to get in a word or two. "You look very well yourself, Kamini."

"Thanks to you entirely. You can't imagine how much I have gained after that talk I had with you." And she proceeded to lay bare her married life, how she had point blank refused to be merely a pretty doll to be paraded wherever and whenever the Raja ordered. She now chose where she would go and with whom she would mix. "In fact," she added brightly, "I will soon be telling my husband what to do and what not to do. The wonderful thing is that now that I assert my own independent views, he seems to like me much more than he did before."

Parvati was glad her advice had helped someone to regain her self-respect and get some happiness out of life, but at the same time she could not help thinking of the ironical contrast provided by the fiasco in her own life. Kamini, however, was full of joyful spirits and insisted that Parvati should accompany her to a little supper party the Raja had arranged. She knew what the affair would be like—champagne and cold chicken and cigarette smoke and dancing—and had no illusions about enjoying it. And yet she agreed, partly to please Kamini but mainly because she was in a mood when she did not care where she went and what she did so long as it helped her to forget the emotional vacuum in her life caused by the separation from Srikant. She only asked Kamini if she might take Roopmati also with her and when she said, "Of course, of course, with pleasure," the three of them

left the theatre and the Raja's huge black Packard swiftly carried them through the blacked-out streets to one of the most expensive and exclusive hotels in the city.

The party turned out to be exactly what Parvati had expected. The Raja treated Parvati with extreme courtesy and also some amount of respect, but it was apparent that he was somewhat ill at ease in her presence. He was at a loss to place her exactly. Like all rakes, he was used to dividing women into two classes—those who were 'respectable' and those who were not. His wife belonged to the first category and Roopmati obviously to the second one. But what about Parvati? True she was married to his brother-in-law and, according to Kamni, was highly educated, but then she had been a dancer. And who ever heard of a dancer who was not immoral? Then there was the rumour about the impending divorce. But any temptation he might have had to indulge in a bit of tentative flirtation was scorched first by the presence of his wife and then by the air of intellectual aloofness with which Parvati carried herself. And if there was one thing the Raja feared—and, therefore, hated—most, it was an intellectual woman. In Roopmati, however, he met someone he could understand. She drank the Raja's champagne, she smoked his perfumed cigarettes, she flattered his ego by making complimentary remarks about his clothes, his special brand of tobacco, his gold cigarette case, the diamond-rings on his fingers.

Parvati had taken one look at the dissipated face, the paunchy short body made glaringly ridiculous by a tight black coat and white jodhpurs, and decided that Thakur Harnam Singh, the Raja of Jalpur, did not interest her. Even for the sake of Kamini she would not be able to like him. The more he tried to show off, the more he exposed himself, his ignorance and bad taste. He worked in references to Paris and London in his conversation in order to impress her and when she asked him, "Oh, Raja Sahib, when you were in Paris did you see the Mona Lisa at the Louvre?", he mistook the world-famous

painting for a chorus girl and the art museum for a night club, "Oh, well, no, at least I saw her neither at the Folies Bergere nor at Moulin Rouge." It required all her good breeding and self discipline not to burst out laughing and she abruptly turned away to hide the smile on her face.

Though it was nearly two in the morning, the dance-floor was crowded. Amidst the men dressed in the black-and-white formal evening clothes she saw quite a few Army, Navy and Air Force officers—both Englishmen and Indians—who could be recognized by their uniforms. The women all wore low-cut evening gowns but here and there were a few sari-clad figures, too, heroically trying to keep step with their partners. Parvati saw neither grace nor passion, neither technique nor spontaneity in this western style of dancing. It had always seemed to her as a legal excuse for hugging a woman publicly. The dancers themselves did not seem to find the gyrations enjoyable which alone could condone the lack of artistic beauty in a dance, as in the case of the sweepers and cobblers of Rajnipur. Here there was no question either of art or happiness. It was the mad whirl of fashion, and if you were not in you were out! And so, half of them drunk with wine and the other half sore-eyed with sleep, they dragged themselves and their partners round and round and round, as the heavy fumes of languorous sex rose and mixed with tobacco smoke and vapours of alcohol, covering the entire hall with a blue haze of unhealthy sensuousness.

The Raja asked Parvati, more out of politeness than with any hope of acceptance, if she would dance and on hearing "I am sorry, I don't dance," he turned to Roopmati who consented with alacrity. He had arrived at a pact with his wife, that he won't insist on her dancing and that she would not object to his dancing with other girls. Still he looked at her enquiringly and got up only after she had smiled her permission.

As soon as they were lost in the whirling mass of flesh Parvati turned to Kamini and blurted out what was agitating her mind.

"Any news from home?"

"Yes—and bad news. The property is nearly all sold out and the money-lender's debt is not yet fully cleared. Even the house might have to be sold."

"That would be too bad, wouldn't it?"

"Yes. It is our ancestral residence and our family has lived there for three generations. The rest of the property didn't matter so much but with this house our sentiments and memories are attached." Kamini's voice was choked with emotion. "It will be a great blow to my mother."

"Is there no hope of saving it?"

"Very little, I am afraid. I offered to pay off the mortgage but my mother refused. She said it was shameful for anyone to accept money from a married daughter or sister."

"What is the amount?"

"Five thousand, I think. In any case if the *Sahukar* could be given that much in cash I am sure he won't insist on taking possession of the house."

"And...", she faltered as she spoke, "how is your brother? Is he well?"

"Yes, I believe he is all right. At least he did not mention anything in the last letter that I received over a month ago, except that the estate matters were weighing heavy on his mind and he would be happy when the property as well as the accounts are finished."

Silence fell between the two and for Parvati the atmosphere was charged with memories. Then Kamini spoke.

"*Bhabhi*, may I say something?"

"Yes, Kamini, what is it?"

"I don't want to say anything about the quarrel you have had with my brother. I am an ignorant girl brought up in old ways and the very idea of divorce is strange to me. But I know my mother. She is very kind really though I know she can be hard, too. She just shuts her heart when her religious susceptibilities are hurt. She has

been hard with you and cruel. So, I don't blame you for coming away. But there is only one thing I want from you as a personal favour."

"Yes, Kamini. I will do anything for you."

"It is this. Please don't insist on the divorce just now when my brother is worried about the property and the house. My mother's future must be a big enough problem for him. If you start proceedings now, he...he...may not be able to cope with all the different problems at the same time. Afterwards when he starts practice and is busy with it, then it will be different."

"I understand, Kamini. I will do nothing in a hurry."

The Raja and Roopmati returned, happy and exhausted, and the conversation became general. The dancing had degenerated into drunken revelry as a whole night of alcoholism came home to roost in the early hours of the morning. Pairs hugged and kissed, there were giggles and screams, endearments were shouted as loudly as curses. Some military officers were singing a ribald music-hall ballad. Parvati felt she had had enough and suggested that as it was past four already they had better all go home.

They arrived at the hotel with the milkmen and the news-boys. As she opened her room Parvati saw the fresh morning paper lying on the ground, literally hot from the press. She picked it up and kept it on the bed-side table. Then, after undressing as she slipped between the warm blankets, and extended her arm to switch off the bed-side lamp, she took up the paper to have a glance at the front page headlines. Through half-sleepy eyes she read: "JAPAN BOMBS PEARL HARBOUR—Stab In the Back—While Peace Talks Proceed At Washington—War Spreads To The Far East." It all sounded too remote and irrelevant and so, only mildly curious about the exact location of Pearl Harbour, Parvati went to sleep as Calcutta and India—awoke to find war at India's door-step !

17

AS she woke up after a fitful sleep, Parvati asked herself : Do I still love Srikant ? Far, since she had talked to Kamini, the thought of his domestic and financial worries had been disturbing her acutely. What if she had decided to get a divorce from him, as it was not possible for them to be happy under the menacing and overpowering shadow of his mother ! It did not push out of her heart all the tenderness for him. She would, of course, not go back to him. Her pride would never permit that. But at least she should try to help him in any way she could.

In the afternoon she went to Nataraj Ratan and on the security of a five-year contract got five thousand rupees as a loan. (He was glad to advance this amount as it ensured her continued association with his troupe.) She took the money and sent it to Srikant with a brief letter, saying that though they had decided to part, they could still be friends. He could treat the amount as a loan and return it when he was able to, or by instalments when he set up practice. As a post-script she added:

“I am still convinced that the only honourable thing for us to do is to get a divorce. But I find the law does not help us unless we are prepared to lie and scandalise each other. Surely neither of us would like to resort to such a dishonourable course. Please tell me what we should do in the circumstances. In any case, I am in no hurry about it and as I have no desire to marry again, I am willing to let things go on as they are till such time when you want to be free to remarry.”

For seven days she waited on tenterhooks for the reply. Would he accept the money ? Or would he return it ? Or had he been already compelled to leave the house ? Where was he ? And, the most important of all the questions

that an anxious heart asked, was he well ? Was he well ?

After a week however, the insured packet was returned marked. "Addressee has left." It came as a blow but she refused to give in. She must find out about him, where and in what condition he was, if possible help him. It was then that she thought of Saloni and wrote a letter asking her what she knew about the whereabouts of Sri-kant and Ramadevi. The Harijan woman promptly replied in a letter which, illiterate as she was, she had got written by someone else.

"My respected sister Parvati Devi,

Your kind letter came as a great surprise to me. I had thought you would never remember us, the poor folk of Rajnipur, though we all still remember you and the dance also. I am sorry to tell you that your husband's property was all sold out and he has left for some place with his mother. Rameshwar Dayal has taken possession of every thing and now lives like a lord in the old big house. He has already started harassing the peasants and every one is missing the old zemindar family. Food has become scarce here, the prices have risen. No one can get enough rice to eat. They say it is because of the war. But it must be because of the *sahukar* also who has hoarded so much grain in his house. Many people are leaving the village to work in the sugar factory and some are even going so far as Calcutta and Bombay. Some are joining the Army. At least they will get seventeen rupees a month. I am getting this letter written by a brother of my community who has been to the city and worked in mills. He knows how to read and write even English, and he says he can teach all of us. Our *panchayat* has asked him to stay on in the village as an educated member of the community can help in many ways, particularly to save us from the *sahukar* who is always taking advantage of our ignorance. He may open a school also here. I told him about you and he says I ought to learn to read and write to be able to claim

the friendship of such a great lady. One thing more I want to tell you. My husband has got a job at the sugar factory. He does not beat me any longer and also he has stopped drinking. At least he drinks very little now. He took me to see a lady doctor in the next town and she has given me some medicine. She says soon I will be all right..."

Parvati was both touched and amused to read this letter. But still it threw no light on the whereabouts of Srikant. Where could he have gone? Had he started practice in some small town? Then he must be finding it very difficult without any money. But, proud as he was, he would never let her know. He had even kept his new address a secret. Parvati felt distressed as well as angry.

Meanwhile, her own personal troubles seemed to be ridiculously microscopic in the midst of the cataclysmic and violent upheavals in the world around her. The little spark which had been lighted at Pearl Harbour was spreading all over the Far East with a rapidity that was stunning. As she followed the developments through the newspapers she felt as if a blazing forest fire was creeping along the under-bush, getting nearer every minute. It proved a bloody Christmas in the Pacific. In January the British were steadily withdrawing from Malaya. In February Singapore fell and the Japanese marched through Burma towards the Indian border. Calcutta became full of refugees, pitiable creatures, from Malaya and Burma. One heard terrible stories not only of Japanese atrocities but of the inefficiency and callous indifference of our own British masters and did not know what to believe. It appeared they were dancing at the clubs and hotels while Singapore was being attacked and Parvati could well believe it having herself seen the English officers on the night of December 7, indulging in dancing and drunken revelries. The evacuation of Burma had begun and one heard of racial discrimination—of 'White Road' and 'Black Road'—even in the hour of inglorious flight. On March 15, Rangoon surrendered and Calcutta was struck as by a thousand-ton bomb

Panic reigned, everyone thought of leaving the city and retiring to the towns and villages in the hinterland. The railway stations were besieged as by an invading army, one paid as much as a hundred rupees graft for the privilege of being allowed to purchase a ticket, a cup of tea cost a rupee, porters charged fantastic amounts to carry passengers' luggage to the trains which were packed worse than a sardines tin.

Parvati observed all this and she was appalled by the cowardly spirits who were running away. But on second thoughts she was inclined not to be too severe. A people's moral ultimately depends upon their faith in their rulers' capacity to defend them. But with the fall of Malaya and Burma a strange thing happened. The vast mass of Indians had lost faith not only in Britain's capacity but even in her will to defend India. *Pax Britannia* had gone down along with the *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*. Burma had been surrendered rather than freed and invited to fight for her own freedom. The urgency of the situation brought an important member of the War Cabinet flying all the way from London but the failure of the Cripps mission made it clear that there was no desire to defend India with the help, freely given, of the Indian people under a representative national government. Even ardent wellwishers of the Government began to fear that the fate of Burma was in store for India too.

Nataraj Ratan, chicked-hearted opportunist. who had had a very successful season in Calcutta, disbanded the troupe, gave every one a holiday and asked them to reassemble three months later. Then he packed his bags and fled. Roopmati who had broken relations with her lawyer friend and hitched her wagon to a star—a film star—was migrating from the threatened metropolis to Bombay on the safe West Coast, drawn by love and the possibility of a studio contract. Only Parvati stubbornly insisted on staying. She had nowhere else to go, anyway, and danger only provided an additional incentive to stay.

With the dancing season at an end, however, time hung heavy on her hands and she began to while it away

in picture houses. Most of the films fell much below her fastidious aesthetic standards, yet she preferred to see them rather than sit in the nearly always empty lounge of the hotel. She would sometimes get into a theatre without even caring to look what film was being shown because generally she found that the worse the picture the better it helped her to escape from disturbing reality into the world of make-believe. Generally she went in after the news-reels had already been shown. She was tired of reading and hearing about war the whole day and had no desire to see it in the cinema also. But one day she mis-timed her entry and just as she had occupied her seat a short news-film about China was unreeled on the screen.

It was a grim piece of filmcraft—the terrible picture of 400 millions during five years of war. Parvati had always sympathised with China but only in a vague, remote sort of way. She had once heard Jawaharlal speak about China at a meeting in Lucknow but then he seemed to be always more worried about the plight of the people in other countries—Spain or China or Czechoslovakia—than in India itself. And, with all the respect that she had for him, she had ascribed his moving appeal for funds to send an ambulance unit to China, on behalf of the Congress, to his well-known partiality for international causes. What she saw on the screen today, however, came as a shocking revelation to her. Never before had she been face to face with the horrible reality of war. Never before had she realized what the five years of war had meant in terms of human misery, to the people of China. Before her eyes passed the cavalcade of horrors. Dwelling houses bombed. Dead bodies sprawled across the roads. Men and women and children. Millions of refugees, fleeing from the invaders with terror in their eyes and flaming bitterness in their hearts.

So, that was the Japanese New Order in East Asia ! That was war ! That was what was coming to India ! And one little scene summed up and symbolized the totality of this inhuman carnage and destruction. A building razed to the ground, the smoke still rising from

the debris where a bomb had stuck and in front of it, grimy with smoke and blood and tears, alone and forsaken, a child was crying aloud out of the terror of his soul. When Parvati saw this, all her maternal instincts rose in revolt against such frightfulness and she felt personally attached to the Chinese infant, as if it had been born of her own womb.

On the screen, however, the scene and the mood changed. Now she saw the forces of resistance, the simple Chinese peasants taking arms for the defence of their country, young girls acting as army nurses and carrying rifles on their shoulders, teaching school and making patriotic speeches before village audiences, soldiers singing songs of patriotism, children organising theatrical troupes to stage patriotic plays, guerillas in their cave-dwellings, clothed in rage, armed with crude rifles, ancient swords spears or just bamboo staffs, eating a handful of rice per day, yet their faces shining with the glory of a consecrated cause, their heads held high, smilingly going out to die so that China might live. As the short two-reeler ended, Parvati was surprised to discover that tears were streaming down her face. Never before had she been stirred so deeply—to the very roots of her being.

The main feature film was now flashed on the screen in a glory of brilliant technicolour. Down Argentine Way! Parvati saw it and yet did not see it, for on her mind's screen she was still viewing the grim yet ennobling picture of China. An Argentinian woman of uncertain age was giving an exhibitionist dance, lewd and suggestive like the dances of the savages, lacking even the purifying fire of passion, not wild with abandon but sophisticated with calculated sex suggestion. At another time, she would have been amused and diverted by it but the terrific impact of the film of reality from China had left her in no mood for vulgar unreality. She left the theatre and, through the darkened streets, walked back to the hotel.

As she passed through the lobby one of the bearers informed her that someone had come to see her and was

waiting in her room. "Seems to be a peculiar man," the servant added, "he has been waiting for an hour and says he won't leave without seeing you."

Intrigued and curious, Parvati opened the door of her room which was already lighted and saw a thin, tall man comfortably installed in her arm chair, reading a newspaper.

"You are Parvati Devi?" he said without bothering to get up, "Please sit down." He indicated the chair as if the place belonged to him and it was she who was the visitor. But there was something about the man that took the sting out of his impudent presumptuousness. For one, he was dressed very unassumingly, in a white open collar shirt and shorts without stockings, and Peshawari chappals. He could not be more than thirty years in age, but streaks of silver already shone in his thick mass of black hair which obviously had not had a barber's attention for some months. He had a sensitive, intellectual, clean-shaven face. But the most prominent feature were his eyes, behind thick horn-rimmed glasses. They were a paradox, for in them was both innocence and fanaticism, childlike simplicity and the magnetism of passion. Parvati, sensitive to the power of human personality, knew this was no common intruder. He could be neither a bore nor a charlatan.

"My name is Ajoy. Ajoy Bose."

"How are you, Mr. Bose? May I know to what I owe the honour of this visit?"

"Call me Ajoy, please. I don't want to be confused with the gentleman who escaped from a British prison into the larger prison of Nazi Germany. As for the purpose of my visit I will be quite frank with you."

"I will certainly appreciate that."

"I want to save you, Parvati Devi." And there was the merest trace of a smile on his lips.

"Save me?" She began to wonder if the magnetism in his eyes was not the gleam of insanity. But he looked harmless enough and, anyway, it would be fun to

humour him a bit. "Am I in danger, Mr. Bo...I mean, Ajoy!"

"Yes, you are. And please don't think I am mad." How could he read her thoughts so well? "You are in danger of losing yourself, your integrity, your personality, all the potentialities of doing something useful and good that are in you. You are not merely wasting your time. You are killing yourself, strangling your soul. You ought to work."

It was getting interesting and Parvati was not the one to run away from an intellectual encounter. "It happens that, rehearsing and dancing, I work for nearly ten hours on an average working day—more than any decent trade union would tolerate."

"Yes. I have seen you dancing and I must say you do know something, at least more than most of the so called classical dancers in our country. But it is all a waste of time and energy. I see no point in repeating *ad nauseum* the formal, age-old *mudras* and gestures and symbolism. I don't even enjoy it. Nor does the common man who pays to see you dance."

"The classical *mudras* are the grammar of dancing. Naturally the illiterate don't enjoy grammar.' But one must study it if one wants to learn to write."

"Yet no one ever got a word of wisdom, the least bit of practical instruction or moral inspiration out of a book of grammar!"

"Oh, so you want us to preach through dancing—prostitute art to propaganda?"

"That you are doing already. What are your mythological dance-dramas but propaganda for worn-out superstitions about gods and goddesses? When I saw you enacting the role of Savitri, I wondered how it was that a modern and educated woman like you allowed herself to do propaganda for the reactionary conception of the wife as the devoted slave of her lord and master."

Parvati was proud and obstinate, yet she had a receptive mind and she had to admit to herself that there was

some sense in what Ajoy was saying.

"So you see," he continued, "I am not here to convert you to use your art for propaganda. That you—and all the dancers and all the artistes—have been doing through the ages. The only question is: What sort of propaganda?"

"What sort would you like?" Her question was like a challenge. "Can you give me some themes for our dances and ballets that would appeal to you?"

"Hundreds." And for the first time he put off the mask of cynicism he had been wearing so far and his eyes sparkled with the pure flame of idealism. "I would like you to dance the dance of hunger and death. Let the groans of the oppressed and the down-trodden be heard in the tinkle of your bells. Let the demons in your dance dramas be the demons of Capitalism and Imperialism and Fascism, the real demons who menace this earth. Let your heroes and heroines be the common men and women fighting these demons in the great battle for the liberation of humanity. I would like to see the social and international conflicts reproduced in the patterns of your dances as also the solution of these conflicts which lies only in the unity of the peoples of all nations in a crusade against the three-headed monster of Fascism. For, today all the other conflicts of the world have resolved themselves into this great conflict between Fascism and Democracy. No song, no dance, no art is worthy of itself today unless it is used as a weapon for victory in this, the first People's War of the world."

People's War! Where had she heard this phrase?

"Oh, so you are a Communist!"

"You can call me that, though I am not a member of the party. Not *yet*, at least. But I agree with their line of policy and if they approve of the work I am doing they might admit me. It will be a privilege to belong to the party that is the spear-head of the people's forces in this People's War."

"People's War? But didn't the communists only a year ago call it the Imperialist war?"

"And so it was. But nothing is static in this world of constant flux and the character of a war can change."

"Did the character of this one change?"

"Yes, it did, as soon as the Nazi hordes were turned against the Soviet Union, the fatherland of all the workers of the world."

"The Soviet Union! I have great admiration for the Soviets. But what have they ever done for us, the Indians?"

"They have shown us the way. More. They have saved us from being over-run by Fascist armies."

"But the Japanese entered the war only a few months ago—and the Soviet Union is not even at war with Japan. And you were shouting about 'People's War' months before Pearl Harbour."

"Don't forget the armies of Hitler would have been in India today if it were not for the great Red Army that has stopped them on the plains of Europe."

"So, what do you want us to do?"

"Save yourselves. The enemy stands poised for attack at your gates."

"But what about the enemy within the gates?"

"Imperialism is fast crumbling. It is a lifeless skeleton."

"Have you ever seen a picture of Churchill?"

"Even Churchill must obey the law."

"What law? The Defence of India Rules?"

"No. The law of dialectical materialism, the law of the inevitable ascendancy of the masses. He obeyed it when he, an erstwhile enemy of the Soviets, signed a pact of friendship with the U.S.S.R."

"So you would like Indians to join the army on seventeen rupees a month each."

"*Without* seventeen rupees a month! The Chinese Red guerillas do not draw any salary. Like them we must fight to save our country."

"With the help, and under the command, of the British?"

"If my house is menaced by robbers I do not care who helps me to drive them away."

"But won't the guns that help us to beat back the Japanese be turned against us tomorrow, to deny us the very freedom for which we fight?"

"Not if we have unity."

"Unity between whom?"

"Between the Congress and the Muslim League and the Communists. A real united National Front."

"The Communists did not think of that when they kept the industrial workers aloof from the Congress struggle of civil disobedience in 1930."

"And they were right. Why should the workers have given their lives to install the millionaire industrialists of the Congress in seats of power?"

"And why should the Indians give their lives to reconquer Burma for the British and re-establish the Empire in the Far East?"

It grew into a heated discussion and neither of them gave way, though each acquired a respect for the other's tenacity and firmness of conviction. In the fury of passionate argument, she called him an "Agent of Imperialism" though she knew many an Imperialist would like to hang him; and he called her a "Fifth Columnist" though he was convinced that the Nazis would be glad to put such a free soul into a concentration camp.

Ajoy, the less emotional of the two though he was emotional enough, was the first to call for a cessation of hostilities. "I am afraid," he said, "we are unnecessarily wasting our breath. I see that I can't convince you and you certainly cannot convince me. But I am sure we have both seen on how many different points we do agree, inspite of all our differences. We both hate Fascism. We don't want to be ruled by Japan. We want to end British domination as quickly as possible,

You agree with me that if Japan attacks us the people must resist and not cooperate with them. I agree with you that we must look to the people and not the Government for organizing our national defence. But you say that under the existing circumstances, the people cannot be organized for defence. I say they can be, but at least you agree that there is no harm in trying and finding out for ourselves. You said, 'Go to the people.' I say, 'Let us both go together.' Will you come and help me in my work ?"

"Where ? And what is exactly the nature of your work ?"

"Come with me to the villages of Bengal where I am organizing a movement for the spread of patriotic and anti-Fascist folk-songs. I want you to see if you can use the dances of the people for the same purpose."

The dances of the people ! That great untapped reservoir of artistic vitality of which she had had but a glimpse that night in Rajnipur. She had heard much about the folk-songs and folk-dances of rural Bengal and it would be great to get acquainted with them. Yes, why not ?

"What are you thinking ? Will you come ? Or are you afraid of going alone with a man who is a stranger ?"

So, it was not only an opportunity but a challenge. And to Parvati such a challenge was an invitation to battle and she prided herself on being a warrior. There was no turning back for her, no evasions and excuses, She must go forward.

"Yes, I will," she said and they shook hands on that.

17

THE first thing she learnt about Ajoy was the secret of the streak of white in his hair, which also, in a way, was the secret of his life. It had been caused, he very

casually told her one day as they went from village to village, by a term of forty days solitary confinement that he had had to suffer during his ten years in jail. As a very young man, he had been a terrorist and was sentenced to twelve years for a raid on an armoury in East Bengal. In jail, however, like many terrorists, he had studied Communism and on completion of his sentence, had come out convinced of the Communist stand-point with regard to everything including the war. Parvati, even after innumerable discussion, was not won over by his arguments and suspected that the Communists were really concerned about the safety of the Soviet Union when they talked so eloquently about the defence of India. But she could not help admiring the tenacity, the perseverance, the iron discipline, the utter selflessness of Ajoy and his comrades whom they met in so many villages.

It was her first glimpse of the country-side in Bengal, the miles upon miles of shimmering, waterfilled paddy fields, the picturesque little villages nestling amidst clusters of trees, the meandering rivers, the ever-changing tones of cloud and sky, the gentle, softspoken peasants, not so wretchedly poor as their brothers in the United Provinces, but all the same groaning under the burden of landlordism.

Bengal ! This then was the home province of Tagore, India's immortal poet. She had been in love with the poetry of the great Gurudev when she was in school and in her early years at College she had avidly devoured the rich, resonant prose of his novels and plays. Since then, however, as the contact with science made her increasingly critical of anything that smacked of mysticism or romanticism, she had drifted away from the influence of the sage of Shantiniketan. But his political writings in the last few years of his life had made a deep impression upon her as on all young Indians of her generation, by their bold and clear enunciation of the nationalist creed in its uncompromising opposition both to Imperialism and Japanese Fascism. The Communists, she discovered, were shrewdly using the patriotic fervour of Tagore's

songs—where necessary, adapting them or improvising additional lines to match the rhythm of his famous and popular refrains—to serve the ends of their own “People’s War” propaganda. Ajoy, however could himself compose songs that came nearer the life of the people than even the most popular of Tagore’s. He was poet and composer, singer and chorus leader all rolled into one. In every village he had visited on his previous tour he had organized singing squads of young men and women, boys and girls, who sang his songs at public meetings, community sing-songs, even at religious festivals. And Parvati reckoned that at this rate soon every corner of Bengal would echo with the songs of Ajoy. It was a new kind of propaganda which seemed to be much more effective than the stunts of the Government’s paid publicists. It was successful because both its content and form were rooted in the soil.

The themes and political ideology of these songs, of course, conformed to the “party line.” Danger of Japanese invasion. The determination of Indians to unite and defend their country. The heroic resistance of Stalingrad. Some had, on their own, improvised a simple technique to stage them. There was, for instance, the ‘guerilla song’ which began by individual peasants coming out of hiding, each calling to his comrades, then mustering strong at one place, armed with spears, bows and arrows, even bamboos, and singing in chorus of their resolve to give no quarter to the enemy. But the one song which appealed most to Parvati was not directly propagandist. It was composed by Ajoy in jail and simply expressed the yearnings of an exile for his home. With infinite tenderness, it invoked the images and memories of home—the little things, the humble people, the relationship between the man and the soil—and tears came to her eyes when Ajoy translated it for her. There was not one word of propaganda against Fascism in it but by merely reminding people of the beauty and grace of life that Japanese bombs might one day destroy, it did more than anything else to steel the people’s morale against the invader. It represented the poet not as pro-

pagandist but as a man who had vindicated the muses by finding his way into the hearts of his fellow-men.

Ajoy was not merely interested in the popularisation of his own 'purposeful' songs but also in a comparative study of folk-poetry of the different provinces. And so when they were free from their own work, he went and attended the peasants' community sing-songs and *kirtans*, their folk-dances and festivals, drawing inspiration for their work from this live contact with the cultural life of the people.

The June sun shone pitilessly and there was not a speck of cloud in the copper-tinted sky. The earth was parched and cracked and the water sank deeper in the wells. To escape sun-stroke, Ajoy and his little group travelled from one village to another in the last watches of the night, in carts or on foot, finding their way by starlight or the thin pale water of the waning moon. They had to reach their destination before the sun was higher than the tree tops and the air became laden with oppressive and enervating heat. Parvati who had always prided herself on her health and powers of endurance enjoyed these early morning tramps across country, walking through fields and dried-up river beds, only the gentle breeze keeping them company. Silence would fall over the little group at such moments and each would be lost in his or her own thoughts. In newspapers that reached them, sometimes weeks after publication, they had read of the air-raids on Ceylon, Vizgapatam and Cocanada. There had been 'alerts' in Madras and Jap reconnaissance planes had been over Chittagong and once even over Calcutta.

No longer did one talk of war being at India's doorstep. It was, there in their midst, one could see its grim spectre, hear its shell-bursts and smell the odour of blood. Ajoy was like a man possessed, singing, speaking, lecturing, shouting, in a fury of desperate emotion, for there was no time to be lost. The invader was on the march and the country had to be prepared for his 'reception'. He felt he—the party and the ideology he represented—was succeeding in rousing the people. But Parvati,

with a woman's intuition, knew better. She saw, of course, that the Communists had, by sheer dint of hard work and persistent propaganda, converted small but active groups everywhere, fully imbued with anti-Fascist ideology. But what about the rest of the people? The sullen, resentful faces she saw, bitter with the memories of awful repression in the past. Will they be able, when the hour struck, to make the fine distinction between an Imperialism on the defensive and an aggressive Fascism? What about the people she had met in cities all over India, most of them so desperately anti-British, that they could not see the awful reality of an impending Japanese invasion? As she saw the situation, the Indians who were patriotic were moving, sullenly and resentfully, in many cases in spite of themselves, towards an attitude of neutrality, if not of sympathy with Fascism. Then there were millions who were too poor to understand or to care—she had met them, too, in Rajnipur and elsewhere—and their present lot was so bad that they could imagine nothing better.

And yet she wanted this dangerous apathy to be broken, with all her mind and soul she wanted her country to range itself against the forces of darkness that threatened to overpower the world. The vivid horror she had seen in that film of war in China was still deeply imprinted on her mind; that poor, orphaned, abandoned Chinese baby still haunted her dreams. How could she—her country—help China and fight the menace of Japanese militarism that was striding towards the frontiers of India, menacingly nearer every moment? And she knew that only a big gesture, a historic change of policy on the part of India's rulers, would produce the necessary psychological stimulus for a mass anti-Fascist upsurge. But Cripps had come and gone. And there seemed no prospect of the Imperial heart of Britain relenting, abandoning the dream of Empire. Was, then, India lost, ground between the mill-stones of an intransigent and unthinking Imperialism and a ruthless, ambitious Fascism? The fearful question mark burned into her soul but she did not confront Ajoy with it. For she did not want to damp his fiery ardour,

the fanatical spirit of the crusader that seemed so sure of success. Disillusion hurts. She did not want to hurt him. Why ?

Did she love him ? In the silence of the starlit nights, as even their footfalls on the powdery white road hardly produced a sound, Parvati tried to analyse her own emotions for Ajoy—and for Srikant ! Had the one replaced the other in her heart ? She knew that she had, in the few weeks she had passed with him, acquired a great respect for Ajoy. It was not merely that he was so selfless, that he had sacrificed so much for his country—his youth, his education, his property, even his family. But, more than that, what she admired in him was a certain quality of hardness—not the hardness of stone but of a diamond that cut others without being even scratched itself ! He was humble and human and she knew he wore his cynicism only as a mask. But where his ideological convictions were concerned he was hard like steel and sharp like the blade of a sword, unbreakable and uncompromising, allowing no weakness of body or mind or heart to swerve him from what he regarded as the path of duty. His comrades told stories of his prodigious strength of will, how when he became a terrorist he left home and parents, brothers and sisters ; and even the tears of his mother could not call him back. She died of a broken heart and though he manifestly suffered when he heard the news and overnight deep lines of grief appeared on his face, he never went back. Parvati felt inspired when she heard that. This was the quality she would have liked to see in Srikant who, by contrast and through the perspective of separation, now appeared to her weak-minded, vacillating and almost unprincipled. Was admiration for Ajoy turning into love ? The test came soon enough.

One hot night during their stay in a village, Parvati could not sleep and came out of the hut that she shared with the two other girls of the party. The moon was high up in the sky and the landscape, hushed and peaceful, wore a magical, silvery look. A soft, cool breeze was blowing and Parvati decided to go back and wake up

her companions to come out and sleep in the open. But just as she was about to go in she desisted. She saw someone sitting on the low boundary wall. She recognized the silaouted profile. It was Ajoy. He was singing to himself, so softly that he was hardly audible. Parvati recognized the song. It was the one about his village. And there was such sadness in his voice, such haunting melancholy ! This was a new and unexpected facet of the character of Ajoy—Ajoy the relentless fighter, Ajoy the cynic, Ajoy who seemed to have turned all personal feeling into a passion for "the cause" ! Parvati had known that behind the mask of the cynical revolutionary were the gentle features of a poet. But somehow she had never associated Ajoy with such ordinary human emotions as grief and sorrow, longing and love. Could it be that he too was suffering from a personal frustration that he was too proud to confess in the light of day but which found expression in a lonely midnight song ?

She went up to him and softly said, "Hello, Ajoy".

He was so surprised to hear her voice that he almost fell off his perch. And even in the soft moonlight Parvati could see him putting on his casual, cynical mask over his saddened face.

"Oh, hello, Parvati. Can't you too sleep ? It is so hot inside, isn't it ?"

"Yes, what were you singing, Ajoy ?"

"Nothing particular. It was that same song about my village."

"I heard you. You sounded so sad. What is distressing you, Ajoy ?"

"Distressing me ?" The laugh that he laughed was hollow and false. "Now that's a good one. What on earth could be distressing *me* ?"

"Don't lie to me, please. You sounded so sad and lonely."

"A little tired, perhaps." He was perceptibly weakening. The mask of cynicism was slipping from his face. "Yes, and a little lonely too."

For a moment there was silence. Then Parvati asked the question she had been wanting to ask for a very long time. "Ajoy, tell me. Why don't you marry? Or if, as a Communist, you don't believe in formal ceremony, why don't you let some girl comrade who shares your ideas, gives you the tenderness and love that you so surely need? Yes, and physical companionship too. A man need that, as much as he needs affection."

Once again Ajoy tried to take refuge in cynical humour. "But which girl would look at a broken down, grey-haired man like me?"

"Don't be silly, Ajoy. Why, any girl would consider herself lucky to share her life with you."

"Would she?"

Just two words he uttered and then looked away. But Parvati who knew that the moment she had been expecting—hoping for or fearing?—had arrived, saw in a blinding flash the issue that she had been evading. Now she could escape no longer. In two words he had posed a series of questions. Did she love him? Could she love him? What exactly were her feelings for him?

Parvati knew she tremendously admired and respected Ajoy—for what he stood, for what he had done and what he had sacrificed. But in that moment of critical decision she knew that however much she respected and admired Ajoy, somehow he did not produce in her that chemical, physical reaction that Srikant had done from the first. It was not exactly a lack of tenderness, for when she saw him, tired and fatigued, she felt like taking his head on her lap and caressing him to sleep. But this was the woman's protective instinct of motherhood and not the spark of passion that the very nearness of Srikant set alight. And yet she knew quite definitely that if at any time Ajoy had sought her body, she would have given it to him not only without regret and without hesitation, but with a sense of exultation that comes from the fulfilment of duty. No idea of infidelity or immorality entered her head when she thought of this possibility. What could be more proper—more moral—than to use

her body to give comfort and solace to one who had given his all to the cause of his people ?

"I would consider it a privilege if my body could give some comfort and relief to one like you "

"It is not your body I crave, Parvati, but your love." And Parvati felt ashamed that she had imagined that a sensitive man like him could be satisfied with a loveless physical relationship.

"If it was in my power to give you love I would have given that also to you. But it belongs to someone else."

"To your husband ?"

"Yes." And as she uttered the affirmative she knew it was true though for months she had been trying to deny it to herself.

"But I thought you were going to divorce him."

"Yes. I might still do that if I can find an honourable way of doing it without dragging his name and mine in the filth of scandal and false accusations as the law demands as a condition for divorce. But love does not seem to take account of the legal positions. I know I would have loved him even if we were not married, and it seems I will continue to love him even if we are divorced."

"I know how you feel, Parvati. I knew it all along and that is why I never wanted you to know what I felt for you. But you caught me in a weak moment. And now I suppose you will despise me—or, what is worse, pity me."

"Pity you ?" She knew only humour could restore the unselfconscious comradeship between them. "You pitiless Communist. Do you think I would waste my pity on you when I know that any day you might put me against the wall and shoot me as a Fifth Columnist or a dangerous deviationist ?"

Ajoy laughed, "You counter-revolutionary bourgeoisie intellectual wife of a feudal landlord, we had better go in and sleep. In a couple of hours we have to start again."

Parvati laughed, but as she watched Ajoy go into his hut and turned to go into her own, there was sadness in her heart. Would even the abolition of private property, she wondered, solve the painful problem of unrequited love ?

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One morning, as the sun was casting long shadows of trees across the fields, they entered a village. It was an ordinary village, no different from the hundreds of others they had already visited, but something special seemed to be afoot here that day. There was the sound of girls singing and the laughter and acclamation of a crowd. They hurried to see what was happening and Parvati found both her pulse and her steps quickened by the call of music.

It was a procession of six girls, none older than fifteen or sixteen, each with a winnowing basket and a water-pot on her head, walking in a graceful formation, the water in their pots going plop-plop-plop as they swayed with the rhythm of their gong in simple improvised dance movements. The whole village population was following the girls, laughing and joining in the song, shouting and cheering, and at every few steps a housewife came out and gave the girls a handful of rice or *dal*, a pice or just a pinch of salt, as a token of friendly offering. It was, Ajoy explained, a band of girls from the neighbouring village who had come singing the "Rain song", invoking the clouds to come down on earth and relieve the drought and the famine. It was a beautiful and picturesque ritual, a demonstration of that gracious old culture that was still found in the villages.

Parvati could only admire the deep rich voices and the attractive cadence of the song, not understanding the Bengali words, but later that evening Ajoy read out a translation of the song in English from the poet Jasimuddin's "The Field of the Embroidered Quilt" and she marvelled at the poetic beauty with which the unknown folk-poet had depicted the peasant's relation with the elements not as a cruel oppressor, but as a friend who,

perhaps, was a trifle unpunctual in his visits. Also with an almost poignant imagery, it brought out the utter dependence of the Indian peasant upon the vagaries of nature and the longing with which he awaits the coming of the rain.

"Black cloud, come down, come down;
Flower-bearing cloud, come down, come;
Cloud like cotton, Cloud like dust,
O let your sweat pour down !
Blind Cloud, Blind cloud come,
Let your twelve Brother Cloudlets come,
Drop a little water that we
May eat good rice.

* * *

Soft Rain, gently fall,
In the house the plough neglected lies,
In the burning sun the farmer dies,
O Rain with laughing-face, come !"

Whether as a result of the village-maidens' prayer or by the action of the sea, the sun and the wind, within a week thick, black, water-bearing clouds covered the Bengal sky. The Rains came ! The farmers rejoiced, the children enjoyed a natural shower bath, the thirsty earth greedily sucked every drop that fell. Streams gurgled down the mountains and the dried-up river beds were covered with water again. Ajoy's party enjoyed the first few cool days of the monsoon season, though now they had to make wide detours to cross the rivers over bridges or by boats. More rains came and the countryside was flooded, rivers and streams overflowed, bridges were washed away, boats capsized, cattle were drowned and villages were surrounded by water. Towards the end of July they found themselves cut off from the world stranded in a village that happily was situated on a high level ground. Without radio, without newspapers, without letters, they lived there for three days, four days, five days a week—till they lost all count of time, spending their days reading and re-reading what few books they had with them, arguing endlessly over politics or teaching their anti-Fascist songs to the villagers,

But the back of the monsoon was broken and once again the fiery sun held sway over earth and sky. The expanse of water began to shrink, the rivers returned to their beds and resumed their sleepy flow, the roads stopped pretending to be rivers and began to imitate the famous General Mud of Russia. Communications became possible again and Ajoy, Parvati and their group emerged from their enforced isolation. They began walking in the direction of a big village, almost a town, that lay about a dozen miles across the river. The first thing Ajoy did was to go to the post office and ask what date it was.

"It is the twelfth of August", the polite official informed him and asked how it happened he had lost track of the calendar.

"We were stranded in a small village where no one possessed a calendar, much less a radio. Of course there were no newspapers...By the way, has anything important happened lately? What happened at the A.I. C. C. meeting in Bombay, I wonder? Have you any paper that you could lend me?"

The post-master, an obliging man, handed his copy of the "Amrit Bazar Patrika."

"Here it is. You can read for yourself what has happened. Gandhiji and all the Congress leaders were arrested three days ago."

Ajoy snatched the paper and, spreading it on the ground, sat down to read it. There it was in black and white, All India Congress Committee session in Bombay. Resolution sanctioning the start of civil disobedience passed. Next morning Gandhiji, Azad, Nehru and all other prominent leaders arrested. And then the usual aftermath of such arrests. Hartals all over India, Strikes, Lathi Charges, Tear Gas, Firing, Mobs retaliating with violence. Incendiarism. Policeman attacked. For a moment Ajoy felt stunned by the terrific impact of the news, then his objective mind asserted itself and he applied himself to the immediate needs of the situation. He must meet local Communists if any, and hold a

public meeting to protest against the arrest of national leaders. Parvati, however, was not capable of recovering from a shock with such speed. She read each line in the paper over and over again, stupefied by the horror of what had happened and the greater horror of what might yet happen.

The meeting was held in the evening on the local *maidan* and a crowd of nearly five hundred was drawn by the sight of the National Tricolour and the Red Flag, flying side by side on a platform made out of four tables of unequal heights joined together. Ajoy tactful strategist, sensed the over-wrought emotional, resentful mood of the audience, most of whom seemed to be suspiciously eyeing the Red Flag with the hammer and sickle. He began by singing in his resonant voice the new militant version of *Vande Mataram*—the Salute to the Mother Country not of a meek and mild *satyagrahi*, but of the gallant soldier determined to die for the defence of his homeland. The Communists had 'sub-edited' Bankim Chatterjee's dirge-like mystical-cum-patriotic song, changed its tune and turned it into a determined and militant challenge to Fascism. But in the bitter mood created by the arrest of leaders, the people took it to mean a denunciation of British Imperialism. They applauded the sentiment that the sons of India would give no quarter to the enemies of national freedom—and it was apparent they were not particularly thinking of the would-be invaders from Japan !

When the song was over, Ajoy began to speak and after four months among Bengalis, Parvati was able to grasp the sense of it. He began with a fervent denunciation of the Government action in arresting the national leaders. "The nation will not forgive this most arrogant and provocative gesture of a desperate, decaying Imperialism." This was greeted with tumultuous cheers and shouts of "*Inqilab Zindabad*." Then he pointed out the serious situation in the country—Fascism violently knocking at our doors and Imperialism refusing to come off our backs. This statement went uncontested and the second simile rather appealed to the imagination

of the audience. 'What then, is the remedy?', he asked in ringing tones. "Is it to start a campaign of civil disobedience, strikes and sabotage?" Then, after a dramatic pause, he himself answered the question: "No, comrades, no. Today any such thing is to play into the hands of the Japanese and their *agents provocateur* whose work would be much simplified if we ourselves undertook to destroy the defences of the country and disorganize the country's war effort.'

This was enough to antagonise a section of the audience and from now on every sentence that Ajoy uttered was subjected to howling and barracking. If he said the Japanese were enemies of humanity, they shouted, "What about the British?", if he referred to the glorious role played by the Red Army of the Soviet Union, they countered with, "What has it done for our freedom?", 'Stalin has signed a pact with Churchill to maintain the British Empire intact for 20 years,' "Shame", "Shame". It was a case of trying to swim against the current and the half a dozen Communists present were hopelessly outnumbered. In a way, Parvati was glad, because the interrupters were only expressing rather violently and bitterly the doubts and fears she had felt herself. But at the same time she admired Ajoy's stand against such overwhelming opposition.

"Comrades! Beware! There are Fifth Columnists in our midst who will tell you to derail trains and commit other acts of sabotage. Don't listen to them, for they are agents of our enemy, Japan. You must..." A stone came flying and got Ajoy squarely on the jaw. Pandemonium reigned. Some khaddar-clad Congressmen tried to find the miscreant, loudly declaring that such acts of hooliganism were unworthy of those who called themselves the followers of Mahatma Gandhi. This led to cross-talk, allegations and counter-allegations, and it seemed as if several dozen meetings were being held simultaneously in place of the one that they had gathered to attend.

Meanwhile, Parvati had run to Ajoy's side to render First Aid. There was a big bluish mark on his cheek where the stone had struck him and the mouth was

bleeding from within. Someone fetched a little ice from a *sharbat*-vendor's shop, she made him keep it in his mouth and soon the bleeding was stopped. There was no question of the meeting being continued, as Ajoy could hardly speak. The crowd had already begun to melt. Soon only a dozen people were left and they were also about to move away when a plain clothes man approached Ajoy and asked "Are you Mr. Ajoy Kumar Bose?" and when he pleaded guilty to the charge, "We have a warrant for arrest."

"His arrest?" Parvati could hardly believe her ears. "Don't you know he was just addressing this crowd and asking the people not to help saboteurs."

"Oh, he organized the meeting. So he is responsible." And then turning to the prisoner who had been manacled by now, "Didn't you know it is illegal for more than five people to assemble, that public meetings are forbidden? And, of course, there must be many other charges against you. You are a Communist, aren't you?"

"Yes, I am," Ajoy replied proudly and when after a brief "Good-bye, Parvati keep the flag flying on the art front", he was led away, he still walked erect and unafraid, in spite of the swelling on his cheek.

Parvati felt like laughing and crying simultaneously. It was a grim joke to arrest a man who had been persuading people not to damage Government property. And then, with a pang of sudden feeling, she realised how much Ajoy had come to mean to her. How she would miss those stormy discussions, the tramps across country, his songs, his infectious sense of humour, his dauntless courage, his hundred carat sincerity! She knew definitely that she did not love him as she had loved Srikant once—as she loved him still!—, but a corner of her heart would forever carry the image of Ajoy.

19

DECEMBER in Calcutta.

Once again Parvati stood on the wings, waiting for her turn to go on the stage, as the orchestra tuned up for the overture, and her thoughts flew back over the years. Forty months had passed since she had made her first public appearance as a dancer at the college gathering on that fateful night of September 1, 1939. She was no longer the same self-conscious, excited girl who had danced that night with the carefree abandon of youth. Much had happened in the intervening period to change her—and to change the world around her !

The *sitar* player touched the magic strings and memories came flying on the wings of music. Memories ! Painful and pleasant ! The death of her beloved mother. The sordid experience with her uncle. Flight from Benares and unemployment in Cawnpore. Nataraj Ratan and Roopmati. (A smile flickered on her lips as she thought of her first encounter with the fiery dancer). Travelling round the country with the dance troupe. Bombay interlude and the unpleasant Juhu adventure with Narendra. Poor Narendra ! She no longer thought of him with any bitterness. Only a few weeks ago she had read the sad news of his death in action in Africa. The *sitar* strings struck at a quickened tempo, recalled the dramatic meeting with Srikant and spoke of the raptures of first love. Her heart beat faster as she thought, with involuntary tenderness, of the man whom she had married. She had quarrelled with him and left him, but would she never be able to stop loving him ? No. Never. She still loved him, ached for him. Time had dulled the edge of bitterness and now she could think of him only with tender emotion. In the perspective of separation his faults had faded away, only his essential goodness remained in focus. The thought of

a possible re-union was no longer intolerable to her. Only pride barred the way.

A violin broke forth into a trembling vibrating octave. Her unhappy life as a prisoner in Ramadevi's castle—a series of painful flashes! The *tabla* came up with an insistent, pulsating tattoo. That was Saloni, dancing to the wild rhythm of the *dholak*. The Shrill clarinet competing with the resounding clash of symbols. Her quarrel with Srikant, the accusations and counter-accusations, the final rupture. In the wailing *sarangi* was the pathetic, distressful cry of the Chinese baby she had seen on the screen. And then as the entire orchestra burst forth in a tumultuous crescendo, she heard Ajoy's powerful voice rising in indignation against the menace of Fascism. All these different notes, grave and gay, rhythmic and discordant, had gone into the symphony of her life and who could say one was less important than the other. She was today what she had been and seen, the sum-total of her experiences.

What was she today? Not what she had intended. Destiny—which she knew was another name for the totality of personal and social circumstances—had played strange tricks with her. She had wanted to be a doctor but her mother's sudden death had made that impossible. As a result of her revolt against the infamous suggestion of her uncle she had been thrown on her own resources, she had tried to get a job as a teacher but landed a contract as a dancer. From the stage to a zamindar's home, as a happy bride and an unhappy daughter-in-law, and back again on the stage. But that glimpse of war-torn, bleeding China and her contact with Ajoy had brought about the greatest change in her life and personality. The stage was no longer merely a career. It was today a mission. Even more than that. A battle field on which she must fight the enemies of humanity, in her own way, with her own weapons. Inspiration had come to her from what Ajoy had told her of the People's Theatre movement of China where song and dance and drama, traditional as well as modern, were being used

for the political education of the masses, to inspire them with the spirit of undying resistance. And she had found indigenous material to work upon in the crude but vital song and dance of the Harijars of Rajnipur and the more artistic, though no less vital, folk-singing and folk-dancing she had seen during her tour of rural Bengal. In the Indian People's Theatre she had found her home and her friends. A direction and a goal, the purpose of life. In the oppressive atmosphere that prevailed in the country, with the bitter fumes of ineffectual revolt, the gags of oppression, the paradoxes and contradictions of Imperialism and Fascism producing a fog of hopeless inertia, it was not easy to know what course she ought to adopt, consistent with her impulses of nationalism and the no less strong convictions of anti-Fascism. An individual could not do much. But at least she could dance and dance to some purpose.

It had not been easy to decide to break away from the glamour and gold of her contract with Natraj Ratan. The shrewd impresario had done his best to lure her back into his golden snare. Roopmati had done her best to debunk her idealism—"You leave all that sort of thing to the politicians, my dear. They have made a mess of the world as it is, don't help them to make a mess of art also"—but she had managed somehow to get out of the contract and be free to devote herself to the People's Theatre. So now she was dancing not in a luxury theatre before an audience of the idle rich but in a small suburban hall before a gathering of jute mill workers, 'lascars' from the ships, radical college students and trade union workers. She was dancing tonight not to earn money for herself, not for the greedy Natraj Ratan, but for a cause that held an irresistible appeal for her from the moment she had heard of it. Four doctors were being sent to China to reinforce the Indian Medical Mission already working there on behalf of the Congress. With the intensification of offensive operations from both sides and the reappearance of Japanese bombers in the skies of China, the number of casualties was mounting at an alarming

rate and doctors and medical supplies were urgently needed. It was a splendid idea, Parvati thought to send this Mission which would not only reaffirm the solidarity of the peoples of India and China but also give a lie to the Imperialist propaganda that India's nationalists were pro-Axis or pro-Japan. If only she had completed her medical studies and qualified as a doctor she would have moved heaven and earth to be one of them. If only Srikant was with her she would have had at least the vicarious satisfaction of sending him on this Mission—but what was the use of thinking such thoughts? He must be somewhere building up a lucrative practice, oblivious of any duty towards India or China! She felt so thwarted and envied the four doctors who were going so heartily that when she saw a report about them in the paper she refused even to read it.

The bell gave the signal, the curtain rose.

The stage was dark, pitch dark. Faint and muffled as if from afar came the sound of the beating of war drums. Slowly, menacingly it came nearer—nearer—nearer! Then gradually the darkness was dissipated and it was the ghostly, grey dawn of an evil day. Suddenly a monstrous shadow appeared on the white curtain at the back of the stage. The audience gasped as the figure of a little girl appeared on the shadow screen—a little girl with two pigtails—and the monster advanced towards her. A harrowing scream and the child was gobbled up by the man-eater. Austria was gone! The monster grew larger before one's eyes, threw his arms about, beat his breast like a gorilla, roared a challenge to the entire world. He started moving forward—nearer, nearer, nearer,—till it seemed the monster shadow would swoop upon the audience, and a woman screamed in horror. The monster stopped, receded. A tall, thin man in top hat with an unmistakable umbrella dangling on one arm, approached the monster bearing a covered tray. Some sacrifice to appease the angry demon! When the cover was removed it disclosed an infant seated on the tray. Quite a tasty morsel for the gargantuan jawa. The man with the umbrella bowed low and retired. The monster pounced,

upon the infant—Czechoslovakia! But the monstrous appetite was whetted rather than appeased and he began a dance of death and destruction. Each time he thumped with his foot it was the bursting of a shell; every time he roared, music stimulated the roar of cannon and machine-gun fire. Smaller figures appeared all around him and the monster began to trample them, fling them in the air, and one heard bloodcurdling screams. Even the man with the umbrella was not to be spared. The monster advanced towards him and only by using the umbrella as a weapon could he save himself. A beautiful girl with desirable curves was the next object of the monster's attention and she could not escape as he hugged her to his vicious bosom. France capitulated. And so it went on till the monster extended a large paw which became bigger and bigger as it came nearer and nearer—till the shadowy illusion was so strong that it seemed the long nailed monstrous fingers would close in upon someone in the front row. Then with the crashing of the orchestra everything went black and it was so quiet that in the audience one could hear his neighbour breathing.

Once again the light on the stage gradually increased with a slow, tragic tune wrung out of a *sarangi*. A woman in rags lay prostrate on the stage, her loose hair streaming on the ground, slowly she lifted her head. She was Parvati. Painfully she made herself stand. There was a rattle of chains. She was hand-cuffed, barred and fettered. She was India. She writhed and twisted and turned to the tune of the *sarangi*—a weird, hopeless dance of agony and bondage. Then she paused in her movements listened, tensed. The war drums beating in the distance produced an eerie effect, their sound mixed with the mournful *sarangi*. As the war drums came menacingly nearer, the bleating of the *sarangi* was drowned, and the woman in rags started dancing a dance of desperate struggle, the clanking of the chains providing the appropriate music to her movement. The orchestra grew louder and more frantic and with the fearful crashing of symbols the monster came dancing on the stage—no longer a distant shadow but a flesh-

and-blood reality, getting nearer every moment. The monster looked at the woman in chains—an ideal condition that facilitated his murderous design. The victim lay before him and someone had thoughtfully bound her hand and foot, so resistance was impossible. So overjoyed was the monster with the prospects of easy victory, that he gloated over his good fortune and drawing his naked sword, danced in an ecstasy of evil passion. While he gleefully prepared for the carving of the victim the woman in chains, now dancing with utter desperation, sent forth a frantic call to her children. Soon the stage was filled with robust boys and girls, each of whom bowed to the mother and then joining their hands, circled round her in a dance of unity. And lo and behold, as they danced the chains fell away and the woman that was India stood erect and free. The children retired, the monster turned round to face not a captive waiting to be slaughtered but a woman free and defiant.

Furious and desperate the monster began his dance of death and destruction to frighten the woman. But she was unafraid and countered it with the dance of resistance, escaping with an agile movement every time he tried to capture her. Meanwhile she was joined by other women—one had a skirt of stars and stripes, another in high boots with a red kerchief on her head, the third wore a long blue and red gown with a star on her breast, the fourth with a red-blue-and white skirt. When one of them was tired the other took her place and the monster was not given a moment's rest. He had to dance and dance till he reeled with exhaustion. The five friends joined hands and surrounded him, narrowing the circle as they danced, till at last the monster was cornered and with a fearful dying yell collapsed at their feet.

Amidst thunderous applause the curtain came down and for the next five minutes the hall rang with cheers. Parvati felt dizzy with success and the strain of the dance, as her colleagues and friends pressed congratulations upon her for the most original ballet she had composed and presented. She felt humbled by this overflow of sincere compliments, humbled and happy, but one

small, still voice within her said, "I wish Srikant was here tonight."

After an interval the curtain rose on another scene—a humble Chinese hut. This was to be a small anti-Japanese play, translated from Chinese and Parvati was the farmer's wife who dies while protecting her children during an air-raid. They had arranged for a gramophone record of air-raid sounds to be played near the microphone for a realistic effect and as she went through the first few lines of the play—the Chinese girl bidding good-bye to her soldier husband and promising to look after and protect their children—she was hoping the stage-manager would not forget to play the record at the proper moment. There were still several minutes to go before the air-raid situation occurred in the play—and yet what was that she heard? The hooting of an air-raid siren. And soon after, the unmistakable droning of aeroplanes, growing steadily nearer. Had they, by mistake, put on the record before the time? Or could it be—? The question was left suspended in her mind as she heard a deafening crash, then another and another, a blinding flash in which the hall was lit up as if by flashlight. And in that split second, as she instinctively turned to see the audience—something she had not done for over a year since she parted from her husband—she thought she saw Srikant among the people in the front rows. He was on his feet and waving his arms, asking the people to be calm. Or, perhaps, it was just an illusion she saw, for the next moment the hall was plunged in complete darkness. Playing the stage role in real life she flung herself at the frightened Chinese children, like a hen taking her chickens under her wings at the approach of a hawk. There was a resounding crash as something struck the ceiling and the walls of her mind crumbled into nothingness.

20

WHEN she awoke she was in a hospital and a nurse was applying pads soaked in iced water to her forehead. With a sudden awakening of memory she remembered the theatre, the play, the air-raid. Was she injured? She moved her hands, felt her chest, abdomen and legs. All intact. Only there was a terrible headache. Had there been a concussion? She felt her head with her hand, and the nurse, noticing that she was awake, reassured her that she was perfectly all right.

"You had a narrow escape, though. Yet you got away only with a slight shock."

Assured of personal safety, her thoughts turned to others.

"Were any other people injured or...?"

"Yes, there were many casualties, a few of which proved fatal". And the Christian nurse made the sign of the cross in salute to the dead.

One of Parvati's colleagues of the People's Theatre strolled in and his glum face brightened up to find her awake and apparently unscathed.

"Hello, Sinha," she wanly smiled a welcome. "Wasn't it an appropriately horrible climax to our show?"

"Yes, it was. Everyone is crazy about your performance. Our People's Theatre has got tremendous publicity and we may soon develop into a big All-India movement."

"What about the medical mission to China? Is it gone?"

"No, not yet. You see, one of the four doctors who was present at our show got rather seriously injured."

"That's too bad, isn't it? Parvati was genuinely distressed to hear it. "What is his name?"

"His name? Let me see. Oh, yes. It is Doctor Srikant!"

Srikant! Could he be *her* Srikant? No, how could he be? She wished he was, she wished he was not. Then she recalled that flash she had had of the audience before the bomb knocked her out.

"Did you say he was there at our show?"

"Yes, he was right in the front row, sitting next to me. In fact he too is admitted in this hospital and as I came to see you I enquired about him. It appears that his case is rather serious. He may not..." He paused, perplexed, by the reaction produced on Parvati. She was removing the sheets that covered her and getting up from the bed, in spite of the nurse's protestations.

"Parvati Devi, Parvati Devi, you shouldn't get up. You are not well enough yet."

"What's the matter, Miss Parvati? You seem so upset. Do you know Dr. Srikant?"

But she was already at the door of the ward. "Yes," she flung back at the astonished Mr. Sinha, "He is my husband."

As she walked through the seemingly endless corridors of the hospital, reeling under the strain and desperate anxiety, asking her way at every turning and corner, only one thought kept striking her mind like hammer blows. She had misunderstood and under-rated Sri Kant! Her beloved Srikant! He was not a coward or a renegade! He had volunteered to go to China, to risk his life on those far flung battle-fields! And the Japs had got him! They had got him—the monsters! And while he lay there, perhaps dying, she might not have even known about him!

Reaching at last the room in the Special Ward she pushed open the swing-doors and went straight to the bed-side. The face, seen through the tangle of bandages, was white like the sheets, like the white-washed walls. It was bloodless and still, not a flicker of life. A horrible fear gripped her. Was he dead? Was he alive? She

felt her entrails turn and twist within her in a dreadful agony of suspense. Her head reeled and she felt the ground slipping from beneath her feet. Just then the doctor, summoned perhaps by the nurse or Mr. Sinha, entered and, finding her dizzy, led her to an easy chair.

"Mrs. Srikant, I presume," said the doctor in a soothing voice. "Please take courage. Your husband will be all right but it will take time. You can help him in this crisis if you conserve your own energy. Here, please take this pick-me-up."

Obediently she took the dose of medicine and then, fortified by the doctor's assurance, took another look at the bandaged face. With almost a shock she discovered someone sitting on a chair on the other side of the bed—Ramadevi ! Parvati's first reaction was one of reawakened hostility. Then she saw the expression on the old woman's face and felt ashamed of even thinking unkindly about her at such a moment. Gone was the haughty aristocratic pride, its place was taken by utterly broken-down humility in the presence of grim destiny. Her son's critical condition had knocked all the fanaticism, even the strength of will, out of her. When Parvati entered she had been counting the beads, muttering prayers to invoke the help of all the deities to save the life of her son. When she finished and turned to see Parvati, the shadow of gloom on her face brightened. There was no hatred, no bitterness, in the look with which she welcomed her daughter-in-law. Rather, it was instinct with a sense of relief. She had found an ally in this unequal combat with Death !

"Daughter, I am glad you have come". The words uttered in a mellow, kindly voice came across the sick-bed. The walls of pride and prejudice collapsed in an instant.

"Yes, daughter, I am glad you have come," she repeated softly, noticing the surprise in Parvati's eyes "and I hope you will stay. He needs you. In his delirium he has been calling out your name."

So he still remembered her, he still loved her ! And

she had been so cruel, so selfish, so uncharitable ! Could she ever excuse herself if—she flinched from the mere thought—if anything happened to him ?

The nurse came in and persuaded Ramadevi who had kept a lonely vigil for nearly twentyfour hours to go in another room and take some rest.

“Yes, mother”—and the word sounded sweet to Parvati’s own ears as she uttered it—, “now that I am here, please rest a while.”

Left alone, she moved her chair nearer the bed. The unconscious man was evidently engaged in a battle for life somewhere in the realms of the subconscious. Unseen monsters seemed to be assailing his body as it writhed, alternately tensed and relaxed, with each passing spasm of pain. It was agonizing to see him suffer and she felt desperate with her own helplessness. Couldn’t she do *something* to relieve his pain ? The head, the left arm and left leg were all bandaged and encased in splints,—it was evidently on this side that he had received the impact of the falling debris—but it was the unhurt right arm that registered the intensity of the strain on the entire system. It quivered with the ebb and flow of pain and the long tapering fingers—the fingers Parvati knew and loved so well—continuously closed and opened, and the palms bore blue marks where the nails dug each time. Acting upon the instinct that is born of love, she put her hand on his bare arm, caressing it ever so gently, stroking the fingers and letting them close on her own palm and, as his nails dug into her flesh, she felt no pain. Did he, within the tortured interior of his subconscious, receive a message of tenderness and love ? Perhaps he did, for soon the fearful spasms showed signs of relaxing and the body no longer rocked with agony. Parvati felt immeasurably rewarded and when she heard him groaning—a sure sign that he had overcome the paralysing attack of debility—she could cry, so great was the relief she felt.

And thus, in alliance with her mother-in-law, she laid siege to the grim forces that threatened to destroy

her husband. It was more than love she fought for—for Srikant at that moment was to her "the meaning of all things in life"—the focal point, as well as the repository not only of her emotion but of all her ideals. He was the soul of honour, the essence of that zealous patriotism that alone could save India from foreign aggression. To save him was her duty as woman and as a patriot.

It was not an easy victory for her. She did not believe in heavenly intervention but for three days while Srikant's life hung as if by a thread over a precipice, Parvati was more than once tempted to join Ramadevi in her prayers. Yet she clung desperately to her will-power, hoping, despairing, fighting, nursing the unconscious man to an awakening of the senses and recovery. On her side, luckily, were ranged all the forces of science brought into action by sympathetic doctors. X-Ray, Oxygen, injections, blood transfusion, artificial feeding everything was tried. The pendulum of life swung between hope and despair and, because of her more than elementary medical knowledge, Parvati could not be consoled, like Ramadevi by hopeful evasion and suffered alone the critical hours.

On the fourth day, Srikant opened his eyes and, on seeing Parvati, he blinked dimly, wondering whether he was dreaming.

"O, Srikant, my darling," she burst out in an ecstasy of joyful relief, unabashed by the presence of the old lady who was muttering prayers of thankfulness, "it is me, Parvati. Don't you recognize me?"

A weak and pale smile dawned on the face under the bandages. "Parvati? I thought I was dreaming. Oh, how beautifully you danced that night. It was absolutely great. I felt so proud of you." That was enough to exhaust him and the last words trailed off into silence as he closed his eyes. But the legions of Death had been pushed back, the march to recovery had begun.

21

"SRIKANT, now that you are well, I would like to go."

From the hospital they had brought him to his little two-room flat where he lived with his mother. For two weeks careful nursing was required and Parvati had stayed. But now the bandages had been removed and except for a deep scar over his left eye-brow which would be permanent, he bore no marks of injury. In a fortnight he would be allowed to move about freely.

"Must you go, Parvati?"

Strangely enough, with Srikant's progressive recovery, a veil of uneasy self-consciousness had fallen between them. They talked with polite formality. Parvati attending to all his patient's needs with the efficiency of a trained nurse, while Srikant could only express his gratitude in formal phrases, as to a kind stranger. Ramadevi, on her part, kept in the background. Parvati had noticed a strange change in the old lady. The transformation from the huge fort-like mansion to this lodging-house in the city, and the attendant changes in economic circumstances seemed to have sobered up and softened the haughty aristocrat. She was as devoted as ever to her religious duties but the vestiges of orthodoxy were already disappearing. She did not subject Parvati to any visible taboo of caste and in dealing with the cosmopolitan crowd of Srikant's friends, who included Muslims and Christians, and lowcaste people, she hardly observed any "untouchability" except to keep her own eating utensils separate and undefiled. All this was gratifying though a little surprising. But, otherwise, Parvati had received no definite assurance that her continued presence would be welcome. And, as the emotional emergency created by Srikant's serious condition.

no longer existed, the undeclared truce seemed to be petering out. She must clear out before the renewal of hostilities.

"Yes, Srikant, it is best that I go."

For a moment there was a strained silence in the room. Then he spoke.

"I cannot stop you, of course. Soon I myself will be leaving for China. The Japanese will need more than one bomb to stop me. But I would have liked you to stay on here."

"Why?" She had a childish habit of interposing the stubborn question mark in the midst of a serious conversation. Once he had been amused by it but today it annoyed him.

"Why?" Because you are my wife, because we promised to share our life together, because.. because. " and his sense of humour reasserted itself in a burst of mild profanity. "Damn it, why should I be afraid of saying so. *because I love you.* I know we had a quarrel—it was a stupid quarrel and I was to blame to a great extent. But, can't we make up like two reasonable human beings.

I love you! She was hearing only those three words—which rang in her ears like the pealing of bells. The clouds of pride and bitterness and recrimination seemed to roll by. But one ominous dark cloud persisted.

"But, Srikant, what about your mother? *She* would not like me to stay."

"Is that all?" He heaved a sigh of relief and the tense anxiety vanished from his face. "Then, close that door, sit near me and listen."

"You were in a temper when you left and so was I," he began, "otherwise we would never have parted so stupidly. You thought I was a zamindar's son, tied to the apron strings of my mother and the old order. I thought you were a society butterfly who could not endure the quiet life in a village and must seek the excitement and applause on a dance-stage. But perhaps

it was good we acted that way. You could never have done what you have done for the People's Theatre and I would have never thought of going to China. And my mother would never have changed."

"Do you mean to say that my coming away helped to change your mother?"

"In a way, yes. You see your departure convinced me of the futility of a policy of compromise. And it convinced my mother of how much I loved and needed you. I knew then that the zamindari would always be a millstone round my neck, holding me down in the mud and filth of reaction. So I set to dispose it off instead of saving it which I could have done with a little effort."

"Srikant!" Her eyes betrayed her admiration.

"It was good riddance, any way. You see, a 'zamindari has more illusion of wealth than reality and so it was hardly a sacrifice on my part. So I convinced my mother there was no other alternative, and with the cash after disposing off the property I brought her to Patna where I started practice. We lived in a poor locality and my mother had even to cook herself. And this life of enforced poverty did more than any lecture of yours or mine could have done. She resented it first, then suffered it grudgingly but finally she gave up her aristocratic outlook. With that went her orthodoxy, too, and her essential humanity reasserted itself. And all this because I refused to keep a servant, telling her I could not afford it."

"You brute!" Parvati was almost angry with him. "You mean you purposely made her work, though you could have kept a servant. How could you be so cruel."

He smiled mischievously. "Well, after all, I had to do something to save her soul. Anyway I have told her everything and now she does not seem to mind. But I have not yet come to the end of my story."

"Then what happened?"

"Then the Japanese war broke out and Patna became full of people running away from Calcutta. So, I decided Calcutta was the place for me to go and work. I came

here, made enquiries about you and learnt you had run away with some wild-haired poet. Since then I have been only living in the hope of wringing his neck one day."

Parvati laughed in spite of herself "I am afraid you can't do it. He is in prison."

"Good for him. In his own interests they ought to keep him there."

And that gave Parvati the cue to launch upon a long account of her adventures all over Bengal, giving a vivid picture of Ajoy, and Srikant remarked. "A Communist with a sense of humour? Impossible. Such an animal doesn't exist." From there was an easy step to the political situation. It was like old times and they talked far into the night, re-establishing the contact between their minds and souls which was, to them both, the only true basis of love. Many of Srikant's friends had been jailed and his sense of humour failed him when he spoke of the terrible conditions in the country—the repression, the food crisis, the ever-nearing menace of invasion, the growing bitterness and frustration among the people, the confusion in their actions and in their thoughts. He confessed he saw no light in the surrounding gloom. "And worst of all," he said with a sudden warmth of feeling, almost as if addressing a meeting "the honour of India is being questioned and assailed abroad. We who were the earliest to see through the deceit and cruelty and blind unreason of Fascism are being accused of being stooges of Fascism. That is why I must go to China on this medical Mission. We are only four Doctors and with all our will we can render precious little help to China. But at least our presence there would be one concrete proof of which way lie the sympathies of nationalist India."

Above the thunder and roar of the city, an air-raid siren sounded its eerie warning.

"They are coming over again and they will continue to come. That is why I would like you to stay with mother. You can continue doing your People's Theatre work. But, heaven alone knows what is going to happen

during the next few months and, away in China, I would feel relieved if I know the two of you are living together."

Ramadevi, serene and white-clad, entered. "Is it another air-raid, Sri?"

"Yes, mother, but never mind that. Parvati is going to live with you when I go away to China."

The beautiful wrinkled face was illuminated with a mellow gentle smile. She approached Parvati and put her hands on her shoulders. "I am so glad, daughter." Then, on a sudden impulse, she drew her to her bosom and burst into tears.

From far away came the roar of the attacking planes, like the flapping of the wings of evil birds, and dull thuds coming frighteningly nearer.

"These are our friends the Japs," shouted Srikant bitterly. "Our friends and liberators! And what are we doing? What can we do?" His voice rose in angry denunciation, as if challenging the crash of the falling bombs. "We are jailed and handcuffed and gagged by the very people who say they would like us to beat off the enemy!" There was bitter irony in his laughter. "If one wants to fight them as a free man without losing one's self respect, one must go all the way to China!"

But Ramadevi, controlling her tears, simply said "Now that Parvati is here I am not afraid."

FINALE

THE mist rising from the river clung low to the flying field and the outline of the hangar was only dimly visible in the light of the beacons that glowed high above. as if suspended in the inky black sky.

A transport aeroplane was wheeled out and soon the purring of the giant motors broke upon the silence of the night. Forms emerged from the aerodrome building and approached the waiting plane. Someone gave instructions to the pilot in Chinese, farewells were exchanged in English, in Bengali, in Hindustani. Three men climbed the gangway and were swallowed in the interior of the monster. A fourth paused on the ladder, turned back and a shadowy form—a woman—disengaged itself from the crowd.

"Parvati!"

"Yes, Srikant."

"You will write to me regularly, won't you?"

"Yes, of course! And you should, too."

"And Parvati?"

"Yes."

"You will look after mother."

"Of course, I will, Srikant."

"Then good bye, my dear!" He turned to go up into the plane. Then, just before stepping in, he turned about again and shouted.

"And Parvati, one thing I forgot."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Don't forget to send me a cable when the little one arrives." And the next moment he was inside and the giant plane was taxi-ing across the field.

The hazy half-light hid the colour that flushed Parvati's cheeks. She smiled to herself as she watched the plane take off. The dark horizon was already turning silver grey and the plane could be clearly seen as it rose from a bank of mist and circled overhead. Then it turned east and flew away, becoming smaller and smaller till it was a mere speck in the distance.

The crowd melted away but Parvati stood, rooted to the spot, her eyes fixed on the horizon. So Srikanth was going away to distant China, to a life of certain danger. May be he would never return alive. But she did not flinch from the possibility. For she knew why he was going. She wanted him to go. She was proud of him because he did not allow her love to hold him back. He was not going away from her, even as the plane receded from sight he was steadily coming nearer. In distance they would find the nearness of their souls. For his love would ever be with her, he had become a part of her very being. She held captive within herself.

Parvati did not know how long she stood there. The plane was now out of sight but from the east a rosy dawn was breaking, holding forth the promise of tomorrow.

Bombay }
May-August, 1943. }

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